

“Are These Women?”

University Students’ Quest for a New Gender

The title of the 1901 novel *Are These Women? A Novel about the Third Sex* immediately focuses the potential reader’s attention on the gender “problem” represented by a certain “type” of woman. These women, female in biology but masculine in ambition, are depicted in the novel’s characters, gathered in university towns where some of them are students. The characters struggle to link their studies to the cause of proving to science and society that their “type” is natural and deserves acknowledgment. The novel’s central character, Minotschka, heatedly explains why she has given up medical studies: “Are not doctors our worst enemies, because they don’t expose the truth publicly in the light of science?” She challenges her companions to alter knowledge itself. “Would you dare to present a doctoral dissertation based on scholarly evidence that provides positive proof of the existence of a third sex?” she asked. “Would you?”¹ The answer was obvious: not if you want to get a degree.

As the students and their friends discuss questions of gender in this scene of the novel, they bring up many of the issues of social change that surfaced in the late nineteenth century, some reflected in the figure of the female student. The characters’ focus on biological knowledge and proof represents the contemporary trend toward using biology to solidify the threatened gender system of nineteenth-century bourgeois Europe. Minotschka’s hostility toward doctors as perpetrators of orthodox knowledge about femininity anticipates much late-twentieth-century scholarship plumbing the influence of doctors on women’s perceptions and practices. Doctors were clearly leaders in claiming that study at the university level would be harmful to society and to women students themselves. Why was a woman student such a potent challenge to

the existing gender order? Why were students with academic goals seen as masculine or non-woman rather than simply eccentrics and exceptions?

Duc's title describes her sympathetic New Women characters as a "third sex." As Duc defines it, the term reveals how fused normative gender roles and biological sex had become. Women who gave up, or at least subordinated, love, children, and family for some other life goal could not be imagined as biologically normal; a whole new gender category was necessary to understand them. In the book, the characters themselves are the experts who explain the "nature" of the "third sex." At this turn-of-the-century moment, other writers on gender and sexuality were using the phrase "third sex" to make the new concept of homosexuality legible to the broad public. This use of "third sex" drew on inversion theories that conflated gender style and sexual object choice. Magnus Hirschfeld adopted it to express his theory of homosexuality (for both males and females) as an intermediate point on a gender continuum. Writers in Hirschfeld's circle conceptualized homosexuals as constituting a third sex distinguishable from the conventionally understood two. Hirschfeld eventually discarded the concept, but the ambiguous term appeared in the titles of a diverse array of books meant to enlighten the public about either New Women or homosexuality in the first decade after 1900.² Duc's book also suggests this second meaning in its portrayals of romantic attachments between such ambitious masculine women.

The novel's dialogue also uses terms such as "perverse" and "Krafft-Ebin-ger" to demonstrate how the characters align themselves with emergent sexological theories. The students and their friends in the novel adopt the notion that gender is the primary determinant of character, but revise its emphasis to claim masculine privileges for themselves. As one character puts it, "We must stand our ground again and again and not let ourselves be forced to retreat or be categorized as sick. . . . We must demonstrate that we are representatives of a combination, a human species, that has a right to be recognized—that has appeared without exception as an intellectual elite."³ These declarations closely resemble the campaign rhetoric of the homosexual rights movement of the time, which claimed that gender inversion or role transgression was a property of especially highly gifted individuals. As members of the third sex, women deserved emancipation that need not be extended to "normal" women, while sex between men was justified as natural to their feminine nature.

Parallel to the novel's development of the proposal that the "Woman Question be put on a different track, not as a Woman Question, but rather as a question of the third sex," the plot follows the love story of Minotschka and Marta. As an aside to an assertion that intellectual women must avoid

marriage, the narrator confides that the two main characters “had developed an intense passion for one another.”⁴ The novels’ conjunction of these two “third sex” implications led to the portrait of this fictional group of emancipated women being interpreted as important evidence of proto-lesbian feminist or homosexual identity among emancipated women at the turn of the century.⁵ However, close reading of the novel calls this assumption into question. The portrayal of the love affair is disconnected from and in tension with the characters’ interpretations of their gender. The discussions, highly critical of heterosexual marriage, leave it implicit that a better alternative might be (same-sex) relationships of equality in status and sameness rather than difference.

Ironically the resolution of the love plot removes the lovers from the assertive circle of homosexual friends, emancipated achieving women, and female students to the private space of a remote estate. The withdrawal of the couple to private space and the very instability of the original student group suggest the fragility and defensive position of women’s single-sex relations and lives. Furthermore, what seems at first glance to be mutually acknowledged same-sex desire, on closer reading turns out to be repressed or secret desire. Minotschka and Marta conceal the romantic side of their friendship from their circle by addressing each other in the formal *Sie*. Toward the end of the novel the reader finds out that Marta and Minotschka’s courtship was idealized and nonsexual for a long time until “their hearts found each other” and they “completely belonged to each other” on a vacation trip.⁶ What the novel leaves unaddressed is how their “passion for one another” fits in with their theories of gender, except as a *faut de mieux*, reinforced by both women’s regret over their heterosexual marriages.

Still, the novel does present characters knowledgeable about theories of sex and gender difference, working toward a new model of identification, and carrying on love affairs with one another. To what extent were women students’ milieus in the late nineteenth century sites for investigation of these phenomena and then for adopting homosexual identity? Additional evidence comes from the lives of feminists from the period such as Anita Augspurg, Franziska Tiburtius, Käthe Schirmacher, Ella Mensch, and Joanna Elberskirchen. Each lived with a female partner after her studies. This fact too hints that study in Switzerland might be a productive site for investigating the origins of female homosexual identity.⁷ However, the rich sources generated by the unusual presence of women in higher education in this period reveal that the causative link must be reversed. University attendance was a consequence rather than a cause of radical feminism, “masculine” ambitions, or close emotional attachments between women.

Swiss universities were not a hotbed for discovery of homosexual identity and proliferation of relationships defined by that term. Except for *Are These Women*, sources produced by women students make no reference to sexological theories and show no evidence of familiarity with them. However, these sources were important sites of the reconstruction of gender for some middle-class women in response to nineteenth-century social and cultural modernization. We might hypothesize that exploring new opportunities, new knowledge, new spaces, and new forms of female sociability fostered awareness of same-sex attractions—attractions that were not, however, connected to discourses of sexual deviance. But the evidence points to a third conclusion where students are concerned: women students gave priority to study and achievement, consciously avoiding passionate entanglements with either sex. They worked at constructing new subject positions that were not limited by gender. They explored new ways of relating to both men and women—models that were based on an ideal of genderless mutual recognition between human subjects on an equal plane.

The hesitant ambivalence toward sex in Duc's development of Minotschka and Marta's love relationship was characteristic of feminist struggles to define and rethink morality and sexuality. As bourgeois girls, students had been socialized to regard sex as a lower and dangerous component of the spectrum of human functions. Control of desires and passions was fundamental to class identity and differentiation. Shame was the woman's proper response to intrusions of the sexual. This automatic experience of emotional discomfort had to be overcome through ideology or avoidance. In addition, feminism that emerged in response to German classical education stressed self-cultivation toward becoming a moral subject.⁸ Emancipation desires were thus embedded in conceptions of moral autonomy and responsibility for the moral improvement of society. The women students' overdetermined concepts of sexual morality inevitably contributed to their motivation to seek emancipation by challenging the barriers against women's higher education. They hoped to use their new knowledge and qualifications to improve the state of morality in society.

Because almost all European women were excluded by custom and lack of preparation from university study, the terms *woman* and *student* seemed radically incompatible.⁹ Yet late-nineteenth-century feminists were determined to open higher education to women. Both proponents and opponents of the regular admission of women to degree programs recognized that lack of university degrees barred women from positions in the two of the most privileged preserves of German middle-class masculinity: the professoriate and the civil service. As feminists concentrated their efforts on access to higher education, defenders of male privilege analyzed, ridiculed, and stigmatized women's desire to study.

Scholars of German women's and institutional history have carefully documented and analyzed feminist educational campaigns within a historiography of Germany's problematic progress toward legal gender equality and access to the public sphere.¹⁰ My analysis concentrates on the deeper motivations for study rooted in self-fashioning and the desire to reshape the entire gender system. Self-making came before, accompanied, and responded to women's inhabiting subject positions previously gendered male. Sexuality (in the Foucauldian sense of the truth of the self) emerged in and through thinking and performing a new iteration of femininity.¹¹ Intellectual women wanted to contribute to German society and culture through the force of their minds, talents, and personalities. They reacted angrily to assumptions that they were imitating or trying to compete with men. They wanted to be recognized as autonomous human subjects, an impossible goal given existing gender assumptions. On both conscious and unconscious ideological levels, students' experiences incited an urgent revision of the meaning of gender—and of sexuality, which served as the primary referent of gender difference in contemporary discourses.

Patricia Mazón argues that women students pursued a strategy of rethinking gender that enabled them to inhabit the category of student as women.¹² My argument builds on Mazón's work to investigate “woman student” memoirs and novels as a site of gender construction for new women of the era. Attention to sexuality in the process of self-fashioning adds a significant new dimension to the history of feminism and gendered sociability. New women students were not simply battling traditional restrictions; they were also consciously laboring to inhabit new gendered subjectivities. At university, women sought to deepen the philosophical underpinnings of their social and political ideas. Self-formation occurred in and through rethinking society, morality, and politics.

The students who represented their experiences in writing were all members of the same social milieu and of a particularly influential generation born between 1855 and 1865.¹³ Most women students were significantly older than their male counterparts. The individuals discussed here were between twenty-three and thirty-five when they began their studies, while male students typically came direct from secondary school at eighteen or nineteen. All came from wealthy families in rural or provincial settings.

Frieda Duensing's (1864–1922) path to the university in Zurich is exemplary of women for whom the university was a late choice following a period of doubts and difficulties. Her struggles and anxieties are clear in the collection of her letters and diary entries published by friends after her death.¹⁴ Ella Mensch (1859–1935) earned one of the first doctorates by a woman in literature, in 1886.¹⁵ Her novel *On Outpost Watch: Novel of My Student Days*

in Zurich was published in 1903, probably at least partially as an intervention into the debates on women's access to German universities.¹⁶ Ricarda Huch (1864–1947) came to Zurich in 1887, earned her doctorate in history in 1892, and stayed on for several years in Zurich to work as a teacher and librarian. The emphasis on freedom as the hallmark of student life and relationships in her 1938 memoir *Spring in Switzerland* can be read as a camouflaged protest against the Nazi regime.¹⁷ Käthe Schirmacher (1865–1930), one of the most colorful figures in the German women's movement, studied in Zurich between 1893 and 1895 and published a pamphlet in 1896 describing and defending women's study there.¹⁸ Her novel *Die Libertad* was inspired by her experiences as a student at the Sorbonne in Paris during the 1880s; her autobiography also touched on her experiences in both Paris and Zurich.¹⁹ Another notable member of this cohort was Anita Augspurg (1857–1943), who earned her law degree in 1898. Even more so than Schirmacher and Duensing, Augspurg had a well-established life before she began her studies at the age of thirty-five.²⁰

Already in the 1880s, Zurich had become the symbolic backdrop for the widely circulated cultural figure of the woman student. As a relatively new university in a liberal city, the University of Zurich was the first in Europe (except the Sorbonne) to admit women as regular students.²¹ For German women especially, Zurich was attractive as an accessible German-speaking city.²² Crossing the international border meant that women's student experiences unfolded in a space outside of their own national context. Zurich's relative smallness and isolation allowed women to live and socialize in ways that might have been difficult in a cosmopolitan city such as Paris. Memoirs by Huch, Schirmacher, and Duensing reflect the exhilaration of exchanging local and family social embeddedness for social ties based on mutuality and intellectual affinity. Once a critical mass of women students were present in university towns like Zurich, the conditions were in place for formation of new, if temporary, forms and sites of both hetero- and homosociability. But in the context of public controversy over the implications of women's university studies, women students' gendered subjectivities took shape between response to stigma and space for creative gender performance.

How Can These Be Women?

Outside observers were keen to interpret the growing number of women students as a variety of the 1890s New Woman. The woman student became a well-worn trope representing fears that women might abandon family

and reproductive duties. The perceived disjunction between “woman” and “student” produced argumentative, literary, visual, and personal attempts to explain, resolve, or solidify the differences between the two.²³ The intensity of stereotyping reactions was far out of proportion to the number of women who actually became university students before World War I. No more than one hundred German women earned doctorates in these years.²⁴ As the students moved differently in the material world, their options were limited from the outside by the stereotype stigmatizing them as gender deviant. Through novels and memoirs, students responded to mainstream, often satirical, representations that pathologized, marginalized, or explained away their intellectual aspirations.

As Duc’s novel had suggested, many doctors were involved in woman student debates. They argued that women’s brains were simply not capable of concentrated study. But opposition to women’s higher education was not solely, or even mainly, based on the assumption of women’s intellectual inferiority.²⁵ The German reaction to the idea of the woman student reflected anxieties about racial and cultural degeneration. Loss of sharply defined gender difference was widely considered a symptom of decline. Intellectual labor, the doctors were sure, would damage women’s reproductive organs and their ability to bear healthy children. The deepest anxiety was not based on predicted biological consequences though; rather the *desire* to study was seen as proof that women were unfeminine and perverse. An 1888 article in the liberal *Kölner Zeitung* concluded, “All vivacity of feeling, all womanly emotions, and physical health as well have left [women students]. Truly educated and cultured men avoid them, uneducated ones flee them, and the healthy, natural women shun their society. Thus these girls stand like hermaphrodites between the two sexes.”²⁶ “Hermaphrodite” has much the same effect as “third sex,” placing women students outside the realm of the biologically normal.

Beyond the biological argumentations, novels such as *The Third Sex*, by Ernst von Wolzogen, picked up the stereotype, ridiculing a student character as an asexual, pedantic feminist who declares her passion for scholarship as an alternative to marriage. Although this minor character is inseparable from her female partner, Wolzogen’s portrayal of the relationship lacks any hint of erotic or emotional connection between the two women. It simply placed them together outside the heterosexual binary.

A few years later, an article in the popular magazine *Die Woche* asked, “Is the woman student regarded as a degenerate member of the female sex even today? Do the relatives of a woman at the university hesitate to talk about her openly as was the case not so long ago?”²⁷ The underlying question posed by the discursive figure of the woman student, left submerged by the

Die Woche writer, was whether a female who was not primarily defined by her attraction to and for men could be considered a woman at all.

Another stereotype that women students needed to confront was the scandalous reputation of Russian students in Switzerland.²⁸ Many Russian students were political radicals and enjoyed flouting bourgeois norms and manners. Tibertius's memoir recounted her contradictory impressions when she first encountered a Russian woman student in Zurich. "Behind the table sat a puzzling being whose natural gender category was at first completely unclear to me," she remembered. "A round boy's head, hair cut short and crookedly parted, huge blue eyeglasses, a very young pale face, thick dark jacket, a cigarette burning in the mouth, everything outward thoroughly boyish—and yet a certain something did not harmonize with the desired masculinity." Tibertius discreetly glanced at the lower half of the person and, discovering a skirt, had her suspicion confirmed. The casual manners and sociability of the Russians made a lasting impression. In contradiction to Tibertius's expectations of decorum at table, "the dishes were not passed, instead everyone leaned across the table and grabbed what they wanted, the gentlemen without wasting a thought on the ladies." Members of the party "gulped everything down as fast as possible and came and went as they pleased."²⁹

For Tibertius, Zurich meant negotiating the cavernous gap between the casual socializing and diminished gender differentiation of the Russian students and the traditional propriety of bourgeois socializing. Despite exposure to alternatives, most of the German students consciously chose to maintain the standards by which they had been raised. They recognized the student years as an unusual period of freedom that had to be protected by proving themselves as respectable women as well as successful academics. Tibertius made sure to be on her best behavior when invited to tea with society women: "I thought that it probably could not hurt the cause I represented if the fancy part of town got to know a student without blue eyeglasses and a sailor's cap for once, one who looked pretty much like other people."³⁰ The students accepted the burden of monitoring and disciplining their own and each other's appearance and behavior in order to maintain both respectability and respect.

Ricarda Huch also described a rule among the female students of the late 1880s not to differentiate themselves from other girls in any way. She had cut her hair short, but let it grow out when she began her studies. "At that time many still thought it was unfeminine to study; any feature of one's appearance or behavior that could be interpreted as masculine was supposed to be avoided."³¹ Ella Mensch's autobiographical novel commented directly

on the responsibility borne by women students. “Naturally in that early period, when the harbingers of a new ideal of female education were still a catacomb congregation, so to speak,” she wrote, “much depended on the appearance and conduct of the individual.” The responsible student should not make things difficult for future women students. “Fanny Stantien,” the passage continued, “had brought along with her the feeling that one stood ‘on the outpost’ and had to avoid any extravagance.”³²

Personal discipline was essential to women students’ long-term project of social change. Another text by Mensch, written many years after her studies, reported bitterly that the students of a later generation no longer kept up these standards. She argued that the early women students’ refusal to engage in “erotic emancipation and radical politics” had secured women’s access to higher education.³³ Mensch’s chagrin reflects the rapidity of gender change in the years preceding World War I. She recognized that elite ideologies and aspirations were no longer able to direct its progress.

The overly serious ambitious figure feared by doctors, ridiculed by novelists, and defended against by women students themselves was not the only image of women students in the popular media. She existed alongside a contradictory image of groups of women students socializing together. These portrayed informality, physical freedom, and fun to a more ambiguous effect. They seemed to imply that once women discovered fun, they would be spoiled for the duties of wife and mother. These anxieties were conventionally expressed in representations of all-female student parties. Memoirs of women students reveal that such fears were not unfounded. On these private occasions, women students did enjoy transgressing the norms of bourgeois sociability. Guests drank alcohol, smoked cigarettes, and stretched out on the sofa or the floor.

Fascination with the space of relaxed female socialization provoked visual representation in popular periodicals. A drawing, simply titled “Studentinnen,” published in the Munich satire journal *Simplicissimus* in 1899 portrayed four women sitting close together. (Fig. 1.1) The depiction of casual female sociability allowed the artist to highlight two opposing sexual potentials. The three students in the background in masculine clothes or postures embody the unattractive and gender-deviant stereotype. But the figure in the foreground is sitting on the floor, her skirt pushed up to her knees. This woman, cigarette raised to her lips, gazes provocatively out at the viewer. The drawing’s combination of satirical mockery and titillation was characteristic of *Simplicissimus*’s particular brand of masculine visual pleasure.

It is tempting to read a photograph that accompanied the 1907 article in *Die Woche* as a sly response to the *Simplicissimus* image. Sophia Goudstikker,



Fig. 1.1. “To close our executive committee meeting, I move that we kick Eulalia Müller out of our club and consider her in disgrace. The little pig got engaged!” “Students,” drawing by Ernst Heilemann, *Simplicissimus* (Munich), January 2, 1900. Jg. 4, 332.

feminist activist and owner of a photography studio in Munich, where *Simplicissimus* was published, took the photographs illustrating the article. The text interprets the photographs as proof of women students’ success at combining hard-working virtue and undiminished femininity. It claims that the photographs of student life would “soothe the consciences of those who prophesied that the loss of femininity would be the unavoidable result of the scholarly activity of women.”³⁴

While the first four photographs do show serious, yet feminine-appearing students hard at work, the fifth portrays four women students smoking and drinking tea (Fig. 1.2). Goudstikker, posing as one of the students in the photo, composed it to contradict the accompanying text. Two of the women, in masculine postures with disarranged hair and cigarettes in the corners of their mouths, look into the camera as if daring the viewer not to take them seriously. Goudstikker, whose masculine appearance made her a fascinating figure during her lifetime, faces another woman, the tips of their cigarettes meeting.³⁵ The other participant in this pseudo-kiss radiates pleasure through her flirtatious half-smile. Through the photograph, Goudstikker managed to insert both female masculinity and female same-sex eroticism into the discourse of the female student.

Despite Goudstikker’s visual suggestion, homosexuality was not the sexual paradox or fear contained in the figure of the woman student. What was at stake was her presumed refusal of heterosexuality. Had she given up her sexual role in favor of “dry” intellectual pursuits? This was the explicit



Fig. 1.2. Photograph accompanying the article “The German Woman Student” in *Die Woche*, 1907 (13). Sophia Goudstikker second from left.

meaning of the term *third sex* as Ernst von Wolzogen employed it.³⁶ Or was freedom from domestic roles dangerously fun and appealing? Even more threatening, was part of the freedom she claimed that of sexual activity outside of marriage, perhaps on her own initiative? University attendance placed her in dangerously close unsupervised proximity to male students who were notorious for sowing wild oats.³⁷ The woman student as a fetish figure contained fears that women would no longer agree to marriage, heterosexuality, and social reproduction in general.

The Third Sex

The problem of the nonheterosexual reproductive woman was taken up in two New Woman novels set in late-nineteenth-century Munich. Both Wolzogen's *The Third Sex* and Helene Stöcker's *Love* used the woman student as one type of New Woman in their attempts to resolve the Heterosexual Question. It was clear to both authors that male-female relations needed to change to accommodate women's emancipation. Yet they worked hard to make philosophical arguments that shored up the "natural" gender binary as constitutive of both social and sexual relations. Wolzogen and Stöcker were progressive intellectuals influenced by Nietzsche and by the application of Darwinian evolution to social and cultural improvement.³⁸ The invisibility of same-sex erotic potential among their types of New Woman was especially significant given the centrality of love and desire to their engagement with women's emancipation. Both authors were well acquainted with vital women who lived largely in single-sex environments, yet could not represent them as loving each other. In each story, important figures subordinate intellectual and professional pursuits to heterosexual love and coupling, while secondary characters embody the preexisting stereotype of the asexual, pitiable woman student.

Helene Stöcker's novel *Love*, although published in 1926, set its narrative of a love affair between its protagonist, Irene, and a married professor in the 1880s.³⁹ As an artist, unmarried lover, intellectual, and auditor of university lectures, Irene is clearly a New Woman. Over the course of the novel, Irene, though tortured by doubt, pushes aside her own art and intellectual development in favor of obsessive devotion to her lover. One sequence has Irene visit Switzerland where she encounters young career women who are enjoying life in a sweet, but shallow and naive way, as well as the faded, bitter, schoolmarmish leader of the feminist movement.⁴⁰ These encounters

with groups of emancipated women confirm for Irene that her love affair, however impossible, is the superior way to live as an independent woman. Although the brief representations of the career women and the feminists contain a hint of homosexuality, emphasis on the shallowness and bitterness of these figures places them outside of heterosexual vitality engendered in the struggle between self-development and devotional love for another. Homosexuality, like casual affairs and asceticism, appears as a solution that is too easy because it avoids the central social and cultural problematic of heterosexuality.

This theme is developed in Irene’s conversations with Hermine, a mathematics student in Zurich. Echoing the women students’ own focus on the necessity of discipline, Hermine explains that she “did without everything that could be called ‘feminine’—even if she got married, she did not want to have a child . . . since an intellectual person, wants at most to live in friendship.” Irene, who longs to give her lover a child, is shocked and baffled by Hermine’s lack of reproductive instinct. “‘We don’t solve the essential problem of our new women’s lives—being a personality and a woman at the same time,’ thought Irene, ‘by ignoring it.’” For Stöcker and others, the goal was not simply emancipating oneself from restrictions and social conventions, but developing “personality” through the struggle between the opposite poles of achievement and devotion to another.

In another conversation with a woman who advocates “free love,” Irene declares, “I venture to conclude, that you have not experienced it—otherwise you would know that free love is not a solution either. . . . Love is the strongest bond that there is—the deepest emotional opposite of ‘freedom.’” She asks the woman how she resolves the problem of femininity and personality, of having to give up the “blessedness we enjoy as women” to pay for what one “as a creative individual is and wants to accomplish.” The woman stuns Irene with her brisk reply that she plans to train a man to satisfy her sexual needs, but otherwise to let her have her own way.⁴¹ Radical “free love” is incompatible with Irene’s sacred ideal of agonistic and sacrificial love.⁴² The relationship notions Irene encounters form a typology of intellectual friendship, casual sexual connection, comfortable careerism, and virginal respectability. None of these types can satisfy Irene’s longing for intense emotion. Her ideological justifications reconcile women’s emancipation with her great love by claiming the latter as an ultimate connection with the essence of “life.”

Like Stöcker’s, Ernst von Wolzogen’s novel confronted the changing shapes of love, sex, and gender through a series of encounters and philosophical discussions.⁴³ The characters who voice these debates were recognizable

caricatures of figures active in Munich feminist and avant-garde circles in the 1890s. Three of its female characters shuttle back and forth between Munich and their studies in Zurich. The novel's central figure, Arnulf Rau, claims the authority to judge whether or not the female characters belong to the third sex, boasting that he invented the term.⁴⁴ Rau explains, "With the expression 'the third sex,' I categorize all the women's lives, which out of natural inclination or under the pressure of circumstances have managed to feel themselves no longer as sexual beings with all the rights and duties that entails, but rather simply as fellow human beings." The "natural neuters," as he calls them, "in earlier times had to fit themselves into the scheme of women's existences, because law and morality forbid them from participation in all of the activities requiring mental and physical strength, which were regarded as the prerogatives of men." Wolzogen's "third sex" describes only women whose biology causes them to refuse heterosexuality. It contains no reference to gender-deviant males or to same-sex desire. Although the speech creates space for exceptional women to share in "the prerogatives of men," the novel represents characters that fit Rau's definition not only as failed heterosexuals, but also as hopelessly incompetent for the male positions to which they aspire.

Rau's speech removes "rights and duties" from their political context and naturalizes them as inherent in two opposed sexual positions. The danger posed by the third sex, as Rau sees it, is third-sex women's recruitment of normal women, driving them "with the whip of ambition into competition with men in all areas."⁴⁵ Rau's construction of femininity as residing in "sensual need or motherly instinct" within a sexual gender binary renders both sexually potent female masculinity and desire between women as impossibilities.⁴⁶ What remains is the asexual woman as the opposite of the heterosexual woman, the "real" woman, needing a man as complement. In this conception, sexual desire—and through it vitality—depends on male response to the female quality of *Reiz* (allure). Since nature is organized around the reproductive urge of these two figures, the third sex can only be a barren and marginal aberration.⁴⁷

To contrast with his conception of the third sex, Rau analyzes the character of Claire, one of the women students. In addition to her medical studies in Zurich, Claire lives with her lover Josef in Munich between semesters. Josef wants to marry and expects Claire to subordinate her life to his like any other wife. Claire, happy with the current arrangement, faces the heterosexual New Woman's dilemma of whether to risk the submission entailed in the legal and cultural institution of marriage. Claire's eventual consent to the marriage shows Rau that she does not belong to the third sex.

At the wedding celebration, Rau toasts Claire's ability to combine her own career with proper feminine love for her husband. Addressing Claire's emancipated friends, Rau proclaims, “You women who are proud of what your sister has accomplished in a hard struggle for the activation of her free will perhaps will say that she is a superwoman who has already overcome the weaknesses of her nature and the submissive longing for the protection of a man.” However, his masculine judgment supersedes their biased self-congratulation. “As a man, however, I tell you,” he continues, “and any man who knows her will say the same thing—she is no Amazon and no thing-woman, but rather simply woman, undoubtedly of the second sex. Her being breathes the charm, the perfume of the woman, and it was not destined for her to go through life without love.” Claire's compromise serves as an object lesson proving “that one can be completely feminine and still a free person, devoted lover of the man of her choice while still leading her own mental life and practicing her own independent career.”⁴⁸ Claire's representation of the student variety of New Woman is redeemed through her consent to making heterosexual love primary. Rau, as gender expert, carves out a compromise that allows for real women to pursue careers as long as they perform the sexual role of the second sex.

Newspaper editorials, images, and novels all portrayed asexuality as the danger represented by the woman student. Both male and female observers presented such figures as rejecting contact with men altogether in a way that made them seem silly and superficial. The Stöcker and Wolzogen novels situated and resolved the problematic of the New Woman within a heterosexual framework. Yet there was more at stake than simply marriage. Like the characters Irene and Claire, women students were involved in the struggle to become a “free person.” Their writings show that achieving this ideal of subjectivity was equally urgent for them. But they did not accept that the agony of a heterosexual love affair was the necessary path. Neither did they reject relationships with men. Instead, female students adopted behavioral androgyny as a strategic choice in their search for a new, more equalitarian, basis for relations between the sexes.

The Discovery of Collegiality: Exploring Heterosociality

If Wolzogen and Stöcker struggled to make intellectual women sexy for the sake of men and reproduction, women students' texts celebrated comradely relations between the sexes. They wished to escape the enforced and, to them, artificial social formulas that seemed to imprison them in a single

subordinate role. Frieda Duensing and Käthe Schirmacher in particular acclaimed heterosocial comradeship as a revolutionary basis for rethinking social relations, gendered subjectivity, and sexual morality. The achievement of equalitarian harmony was a relatively late development in their student careers preceded and accompanied by rejection, hazing, and ridicule on the part of male students. At the beginning of their careers, they were aware of being interlopers, a conspicuous minority with much at stake in the way they performed and interacted with the majority.

Frieda Duensing's description of auditing classes in Munich reflected the isolation felt by pioneers: "I am the only woman, and every class is unpleasant for me, because they all stare at me in these halls and stairways, which have so seldom been desecrated by a profane foot."⁴⁹ The atmosphere of male skepticism if not resistance was felt even more strongly at Zurich a generation earlier. Early medical student Franziska Tiburtius described how students policed one another's reactions to defamation. One of her colleagues became aggrieved, "white hot, spewing fire and rage," demanding that the others take up her cause and make an official complaint. Her anger was so dangerous that the other women "formed a security guard . . . to hold her back from such silliness—since the entire upper city [the university district] would be overjoyed if the story got out."⁵⁰ The earliest women students felt they had to "take it" when they were teased or jeered to prove that they were neither overly sensitive nor easily intimidated.

Unthinking or deliberate humiliations are vivid in the memories of the women student characters in Schirmacher's novel *Libertad*. One of the professors teaches the latest scientific ideas about gender, defining women's essence as a "preponderance of sensuality and instinct." When the character Lotte tries to argue against this reduction of women to sex, the professor replies scornfully, "My dear girl, you understand nothing of these mysteries." The reexperience of shame as she recounts the memory brings up another memory. A man she met while traveling manipulated her into accepting accommodation in his hotel room with the goal of seducing her. Earlier, on the train, the man had assured her that no woman who lived authentically could be sexually virtuous. Determined to prove him wrong, Lotte called on the double consciousness she had learned in the lab, becoming "as cold and steady as an anatomy student dissecting a body for demonstration." Though overwhelmed with rage and fear, she was also "a cold-blooded observer, who heard herself speak, saw herself move, and watched the 'case' unfold before her with an objective scholarly interest."⁵¹ At the university or away, women students were always on their guard, observing themselves through

awareness of the many potential criticisms that might damage their academic success and self-respect. Sexuality, rather than incompetence, was the main and inescapable site of humiliation.

Yet risking humiliation and policing their feelings and behavior were burdens they readily accepted as necessary to inhabit new spaces of physical and intellectual freedom. Lotte’s American husband, listening to his wife’s memories, wonders whether he would have prevailed in the women students’ place. He asks what motivated them to put up with the deprivations and discrimination. Lotte’s friend Phil answers, “You see, for us the university . . . was the Promised Land—we had to set out from the wilderness, the desert, in order to reach it. . . . Once we did, we would be willing to bear anything rather than give it up.” Phil’s biblical image led to a liturgical call and response:

“We were seen as weak—”
 “And therefore, you wanted to achieve Herculean tasks.”
 “As limited in scholarship—”
 “And now you had to be the first.”
 “As fickle—”
 “And had to fight until your last breath.”
 “As the plaything of love and the ornament of life—”
 “And had to put the serious men to shame.”
 “As a cause—”
 “And had to create a personality for yourselves.”⁵²

Looking back, these characters revel in their success in meeting the challenges that the male-dominated university forced on them.

To meet these challenges, women consciously created social personae that steered between masculine and feminine stereotypes. Too much masculinity risked social ostracism, but too much femininity elicited the scorn of male colleagues.⁵³ Male colleagues, as well as the bourgeois world, reflected back to the women their success at finding the right balance. The end of the litany quoted above is significant: “personality” can be read as synonymous with an autonomous subject position. Creating and inhabiting it was both a strategy and a goal for university women. It encompassed a position from which to express creativity and morality. It located the self in the gender-neutral category of *Person* as opposed to *Weibsperson* (female). Women’s reflections on their experiences turned the argument made in *The Third Sex*—that emancipated

choices reflected a “neuter” essence—on its head. From an insider’s view, women had adopted protective neutrality in order to be taken seriously as students and intellectuals. Too strong an interest in love would only prove their second-class status as scholars.

As they began to inhabit this position, Schirmacher and Duensing celebrated the collegiality that blossomed between the sexes once male students accepted them. As Frieda Duensing expressed it in a letter, “Colleagues! A wonderful obligation, a deep respect, a mutual solicitude, solidarity!” Duensing saw these friendships as fundamental for women’s emancipation: “My dear, there is something behind the new idea of freedom for women: it brings the highest morality along with it. In no other social sphere in the world could you find such interaction: so pure, so golden, resounding, unforgettable.” She begged the letter’s recipient to send her daughter to the university so that she too could experience heterosociability in which both sexes belonged to the same moral community.⁵⁴

Schirmacher’s memoir recounts her years in Paris as part of a circle of three men and three women. The group of students enjoyed socializing together in a free and easy way impossible in her hometown of Danzig. From this new sociability she developed a critique of young German women’s position as the passive objects of courtship. For her, the modest, yet flirtatious, femininity expected of the girl being courted was artificial and destructive to women’s development as moral subjects. When her group socialized in public spaces, the young women were exposed to the gaze of respectable society—a gaze that assumed women socializing so freely with men were their mistresses.⁵⁵ This jarring misperception led Schirmacher to imagine the United States as a paradise where all opposite-sex relationships were like those among her school comrades. The American husband in *Libertad* sees marriage as an equalitarian partnership because he grew up with “daily free contact with girls” experienced as “nothing new, horrifying, or amazing.” Schirmacher’s imagined utopian comradeship carries over to romance. “You could also show them you liked them without fear,” he recalls. “Such attractions were returned or they weren’t. Neither person died of a broken heart.”⁵⁶ *Libertad*’s characters reveal why women students may have adopted an androgynous, asexual habitus.

In a pamphlet advocating women’s higher education, Schirmacher claims students’ equalitarian socializing as a key to progressive social change. “Admit it,” she wrote, “is it not powerful social progress when young men and women, who naturally enjoy each other, are allowed to meet each other naturally, honestly, and unhindered on neutral ground?” Schirmacher went

beyond Duensing in imagining future sexual relations developing on the basis of such socializing. She saw it as “a turn for the better” when a girl no longer has to “squeeze her freshest desires into the corset of ‘propriety’” and instead is able to “show her interest in a young man who pleases her without either of them having to think immediately of marriage.”⁵⁷

The exhilarating experience of the new heterosociability in the university setting authorized the most extravagant hopes for achieving the “highest morality” and fostering “powerful social progress.” Duensing and Schirmacher seized on academic collegiality, however fleeting and illusory it may have been, because it seemed to provide a model in real space for the realization of the utopian genderless subjecthood they strove to inhabit.

However, the optimism in these passages masked the persistent problematic of sex that lay not far beneath the surface. The code of sexual honor internalized by most middle-class young women intensified these submerged conflicts.⁵⁸ There was a fine line between a Platonic relationship—one where desire and attraction were sublimated into intellectual exchange—and falling in love, which distracted from one’s real work and carried dangerous temptations for women. It was characteristic of Duensing that her heterosocial relationships were not strictly comradely. Her letters to male friends often exhibited a flirtatious erotic energy underlying the intellectual exchange on the surface. Yet Duensing was bitterly critical of women who let Platonic attraction slide into romance. “They are dumb enough to carry on some kind of a love story on the side,” she wrote. “Almost all! They succumb to the temptations that are offered to every woman here; the men get the best of it, the women only agitation, fetters, and distraction.” Duensing claimed that she firmly rejected romantic overtures; she had “no time for that sort of thing.” Women protected their autonomy by keeping men at arm’s length while they finished their degrees and established their careers. However, her complaint shows that by the end of the 1890s, women students had already begun shaping student life in the direction of twentieth-century models of emancipation that integrated women into careers while maintaining the division of labor in personal and domestic matters.

Women who wrote enthusiastically about university experiences used their confrontation with questions of love and sex to critique the existing order. Their insights into the harm caused by male domination—clearest and most pressing in the realm of sexuality—gave them a sense of being the harbingers of a new order. The struggle for a universal moral and ethical stance to reform gender relations became the core “truth” on which intellectual women such as Schirmacher and Mensch placed their hopes of renewal.

The most radical insights and goals of the New Women of this period almost inevitably pulled them toward suppression of sexual desire that enabled the flourishing of comradely and equalitarian relations between the sexes in the university setting.

Emancipated Homosociality

While new relations with men were surprising and exhilarating, the university setting also allowed for enhanced intimacy in relationships among women struggling with similar dilemmas and conditions. Since nineteenth-century social life, both within and outside the family, was often gender-segregated, the new homosociality did not carry the same revolutionary import as its mixed counterpart. Beyond their same-sex schooling, bourgeois girls were integrated into social networks through family, church, and local elite social rituals. Involvement in charity work, teas, and balls constructed femininity within existing bonds and hierarchies.⁵⁹ Late-nineteenth-century novelists exposed the rigidity, conformity, boredom, and passivity enforced among girls and women within existing modes of elite sociability.⁶⁰ At university women had a chance to revise the purpose of female socializing. Tibertius's memoir reflected the jarring gap between student life and bourgeois Zurich. *Die Libertad* also stressed the impossibility of reintegration into existing social structures and manners. Lack of intellectual stimulation and provincial complacency were especially hard to bear: Phil found her former society "narrow-minded and indifferent to the burning questions of the times." Its members were equally put off by her "'progressive ideas,' critical stance, and coolness towards affairs of love and fashion."⁶¹ Feeling estranged from others' "normal," university women treasured all the more the loving friendship of their female colleagues.

Sharon Marcus's careful analysis of the different meanings of Victorian women's social relationships is helpful in thinking about relationships between women students. Marcus finds that same-sex relations fell into three qualitatively different categories: erotic passion, marriage, and friendship that fit neither of the other categories. She shows that female intimacy in Victorian England was embedded in family and kin relations, including heterosexual marriage.⁶² The university setting and later time period clearly put the female intimacies discussed here in a very different atmosphere. Instead of reinforcing women's social roles, the students were engaged in remaking the expectations that accompanied femininity. Marriages, or female couples whose lives were