The German Art of the Happy Ending

Embellishing and Expanding the Boundaries of Home

Why is it that so few of such exquisite hours of enjoyment are allotted to poor mortals? Earth would be too blissful a place, I imagine.¹

In the present day, North Americans probably do not anticipate a happy ending when they pick up a German novel. The older canonical works they may have read in college courses tend toward tragedy, melancholy, or at best ambivalence—Elective Affinities, A Village Romeo and Juliet, The Metamorphosis, Death in Venice, Woyzeck, and The Earthquake in Chile, for example, end in death, murder, or suicide or, in the case of Earthquake, in multiple homicide. Post-1945 literature—for obvious reasons—seldom ends well either. In Patrick Süskind’s best-selling Perfume (1985), set in the eighteenth century, the distasteful central character is torn to shreds by a frenzied mob. Bernhard Schlink’s The Reader (1995; trans. 1997), an Oprah’s Book Club selection in 1999, concerns an illiterate Holocaust perpetrator who does not find redemption. While countering some clichés, W. G. Sebald’s brooding fiction (Emigrants, 1996; Rings of Saturn, 1999; Vertigo, 1999; Austerlitz, 2001), which Scott Denham describes as narrated with “gentle irony and quiet comic voice,” maintains the association of German literature and culture with “the specifically German catastrophe of modernity that is murder, exile, loss, and grief.”²

This view of German literature as pessimistic and tragic belongs to the cultural frame of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; we misapprehend the past when we conclude by reading backward through two world wars and
through select works from the nineteenth century that nineteenth-century American readers harbored the same image of German fiction and culture. Translated popular literature by German women—as in the case of Marlitt's novels—typically told nineteenth-century Americans an optimistic story of virtue rewarded, obstacles overcome, and deep happiness founded in intimate heterosexual bonding and the social renewal associated with it, that is, happiness in marriage as the "closest union that can exist between two mortals." And although some reviewers scorned this "German bliss," American novel readers bought it. As the Literary World enthusiastically remarked of one such German novel, "The story has also the merit, and a great merit it is, of ending well, and leaving the reader with a pleasant taste in his mouth." If such conclusions constitute, in Janice A. Radway's formulation, myths "in the guise of the truly possible," then these German versions projected bliss in marriage and family as within reach.

SUCH HAPPY ENDINGS of course signal the reliance of this popular German fiction on the conventions of the international romance novel. Therefore, before we examine these endings and the novels that delivered them, some brief generic considerations are useful. As Radway demonstrates in her study of twentieth-century readers, romance readers consider such conclusions essential to their enjoyment and would not read romance novels without them. Defining the romance novel as a "work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines," Pamela Regis concurs. The happy ending figures in her descriptive taxonomy of the genre as a "narrative essential." Moreover, she argues, this vital concluding union of hero and heroine marks the achievement of a state of freedom and thus a "moment of rejoicing for the reader" (33).

Regis, who is interested in how this intensely satisfying conclusion is typically reached, identifies eight narrative events that characterize the romance genre and produce the requisite ending. Three of them prove particularly helpful for parsing the bliss achieved in our set of German novels and its appeal to American readers: (1) the embedding of romance within a defined social situation, (2) the erection within that society of barriers to the union of the heroine and hero, and (3) the jeopardizing of the happy ending by "ritual death," that is, a moment when "the hoped-for resolution seems absolutely impossible, when it seems that the barrier will remain" (31–33, 35). While these nineteenth-century German novels ultimately deviate in many respects from Regis's elaborated model, these three elements joined to the happy ending strikingly recur in the examples to be examined in this chapter.
The German setting provided American readers with an additional twist on such romance elements: imagined as the locus of romance and even decorous adventure, a fictive Germany erected barriers to happiness, yet without fail proved to house freedom and agency, steeped in virtue and sentiment.

**Withholding the Happy Ending: The Clergyman’s Daughter**

With few exceptions, the novels by the seventeen authors in our dataset deliver a happy ending; the rare deviation in effect confirms the norm. Wilhelmine Heimburg’s *Aus dem Leben meiner alten Freundin* (1878; *The Story of a Clergyman’s Daughter*, 1889) provides a case in point. Its focus on frustrated emotional fulfillment affirms the desirability of the happy ending signified by marriage. The novel opens with a discussion between the narrator and her husband as to whether Margaret, an obscure spinster, has a story to tell. Determined to uncover her elderly neighbor’s past, the frame narrator befriends her, eventually becoming her confidante and persuading her to tell her story. The novel concludes with the frame narrator having made her case: were it not for bad luck, Margaret would have married and entered history.

By withholding the happy ending, *Clergyman’s Daughter* intensifies longing for it. After building hopes that Margaret will after many trials be united with her true love, the novel eliminates him with a fall from a horse. Heartbroken, Margaret never weds and lives a life that she herself describes as insignificant. The contrived unhappy ending seems designed to make the reader suffer vicariously; the narrative fortifies the power of love, marriage, and family by not gratifying the wish for fulfillment that has sustained interest in Margaret’s plot strand. *Clergyman’s Daughter* ultimately reinforces the romantic paradigm and by no means discounts the wish for blissful union as misguided daydreaming. Rather, it projects marriage as a desirable norm.

*Aus dem Leben meiner alten Freundin* appeared belatedly under two different titles in North America: the afore-mentioned *The Story of a Clergyman’s Daughter* (Munro, 1889) and *The Pastor’s Daughter* (Worthington, 1890). American readers, who by the time *Clergyman’s Daughter* was rendered were accustomed to other fare from Germany, including Heimburg’s previously translated novels, thus probably read it wishing for a happy ending. The packaging of Donohue Brothers’ early twentieth-century reprint edition of Davis’s translation for the Snug Corner Series suggests as much. The standard cover for this series depicts a young woman with bobbed hair sitting in a tree, a
book on her lap and a satisfied smile on her face. Perhaps, in the end, the book did offer fulfillment as this cover suggests it does: despite withholding the marriage, the novel ends in harmony when the narrator visits Margaret’s grave and hears the bells ringing for evening prayer: “they sounded like peace and reunion!”

Heimburg changed narrative strategies after publishing Clergyman’s Daughter in 1878 to the point of forcing happy endings on her weepy, long-suffering heroines. In Lucie’s Mistake, Her Only Brother, and Cloister Wendhusen, for example, the female protagonists appear all too ready to give up on the possibility of marrying the men they love. It may be, as Urszula Bonter claims, that Heimburg labored under the immediate influence of Marlitt’s happy endings, but romance qua genre exerted pressure on its own accord, and for decades Heimburg’s novels, too, concluded happily in matrimony.

Der Stärkere (1909), which does not end well, was never translated into English. Nor were Antons Erben (1898), where after much suffering the estranged couple is finally reunited, and Wie auch wir vergeben (1907), in which twenty years pass before the lovers can marry. If, as Bonter speculates, Heimburg, freed at last from Marlitt’s influence, later turned to writing more pessimistic, naturalistic novels, this turn was not welcome in America. While these darker novels went untranslated, in the early twentieth century Heimburg’s happy-ending novels were still being reprinted and read. And even when Beetzen Manor, which ends in the heroine’s emotional exhaustion and death, did reach America during the peak years of Heimburg’s popularity, its unhappy ending was not always registered as such. The Bostonian cheerfully characterized it as containing “attractive incidents of love, humor, and ideal happiness” with a “healthful and cleanly” moral. Publishers’ Weekly also implied a happy ending, describing the heroine as “a lovely womanly character” who “in time becomes a help to every one about her.” In the end this book did not gain traction in the United States. Unlike most of Heimburg’s fiction, it was never reprinted; its truncated publication history suggests that it did not deliver what American readers sought in Heimburg’s and other popular works by German women, namely, joy in the ending.

Circumventing Incest and Creating Family:

*Her Only Brother*

The Heimburg novels that Americans avidly read depict heroines whose trials conclude happily with a marriage or reconciliation with the man of their choice. They rely for their effect on harrowing depictions of German families
in which human foible, bad character, outright villainy, and economic distress present nearly insuperable obstacles to romantic union.

Egocentric, unfeeling brothers frequently become the central cause of the suffering of Heimburg’s heroines, and thus the family seldom presents a safe haven. A Heimburg reader can become so accustomed to these bad brothers as to be surprised when a brother exhibits good character. Jaundiced readers might even find themselves idly wondering how the narrative will dispatch the offending brother without undermining nineteenth-century family values. In the 1890s both Gabriele Reuter in *Aus guter Familie* (1895) and Helene Böhlau in *Halbtier!* (1899) deployed the plot element of the bad brother to do just that: undermine the bourgeois family. However, neither of these socially critical, protofeminist works, which end in mental illness and suicide, respectively, was translated into English in its own time. Meanwhile, *Lore von Tollen* and *Cloister Wendhusen*, with their bad brothers, who fortunately cannot in the end impede the heroine’s happiness, appeared in the United States in new illustrated editions in the 1890s.

*Ihr einziger Bruder* (1882; *Her Only Brother*) is Heimburg’s most harrowing bad-brother plot and also her most telling happy resolution of sibling conflict. With the exception of the first five chapters and the conclusion, the plot unfolds as recounted in a manuscript that is being read thirty years after the principal events by a young couple, Klaus and Marie. Here, too, Heimburg deploys a spinster narrator, this time to recount a romance that restores an entire family.

The narrator, Aunt Rosamond, proves a manipulative storyteller abetted by physical disability. Her lameness prevents her from navigating space, and she repeatedly describes herself as impaired as she tries ineffectually to aid her loved ones. It also figures her status as outsider in affairs of the heart and the economy of marriage. One American reviewer saw her as playing the role of a Greek chorus, telling “the reader what he is to think of the others and their doings.” Yet, although she minutely records events, Rosamond only dimly senses the truth in human affairs, catching on just a little too late to be of use—certainly well after the reader does.

Part of the pleasant horror of reading this novel consists in the fact that its austere heroine, Anna Maria von Hegewitz, has, like Jane Austen’s Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, made the mistake of turning down the suit of the love of her life. For pages thereafter the novel offers little prospect of a second chance and a happy ending. Unlike Austen’s Anne, Heimburg’s Anna Maria has not rejected Edwin Stürmer because of poor advice, but because of her sense of duty to her brother, Klaus, who when their mother died had sacrificed his marriage plans to care for his young sister. Now grown up, Anna Maria
regards it as her duty to compensate him by tending to his every need. She finds she is sorely mistaken in her sense of duty, however, when Klaus falls in love with the much younger Susanne.

Unwilling to sacrifice his happiness a second time, Klaus refuses to recognize Susanne's flaws and marries her. His bride's signature “silvery laughter” puts readers on notice that this marriage will not be a good one. The portrait of the heartbreakingly enchanting but amoral Susanne, who with her caprices effortlessly wins all hearts, seems especially designed to torment readers inclined to obedience and duty and, moreover, to enlist their sympathy for the austerely beautiful, loyal, oppressed, and repressed Anna Maria.

Anna Maria, who cannot hide her disapproval, soon finds that she has no place in her brother's home. Her sacrifice now superfluous, she begins to think again of Edwin. But she has not yet drunk the full draught of her suffering, for Edwin also has fallen in love with Susanne. At precisely the moment when Anna Maria, encouraged by Rosamond, believes he is coming to renew his suit, she learns of his love for Susanne. Although the text provides many hints that Anna Maria and Rosamond have misread Edwin, the moment of enlightenment as to the true state of his feelings is excruciating.

If, as Regis asserts, ritual death is a requisite element of romance, then Heimburg has supplied this death in spades in Her Only Brother. In addition to Edwin's love for Susanne, an incipient mismatch in taste and character also surfaces to impede the union of Edwin and Anna Maria. Upon his return, years after Anna Maria rejected his suit, Edwin decorates his home in exotic fashion; Rosamond cannot imagine her niece “resting, in sweet indolence, on those cushions.” Edwin, moreover, disapproves when the virtuous Anna Maria gives a speech at the harvest festival on the family's estate to fill in for her negligent brother. Scowling at the mannish role she plays, Edwin has no eye for this occasion as a fulfillment of duty. With her femininity under erasure and with the competition of Susanne's hyperfemininity, Anna Maria appears to have no chance for happiness. Yet the pressure of genre permits readers to hope.

Fortunes turn so as to punish Klaus, while preserving sibling love, and to unite Anna Maria and Edwin. When Klaus falls ill, Anna Maria loyally nurses him. He dies with his sister at his side, whereas the shallow Susanne is too frightened to enter the sickroom. Meanwhile, when Edwin beholds Anna Maria in the role of devoted sister, nurse, and surrogate mother to Klaus and Susanne's child, his love for her is rekindled. Anna Maria, in turn, in the pattern Regis describes, becomes free to reveal both the motherly self behind her austere exterior and her love for Edwin.

When Susanne thereafter departs for warmer climates, she leaves her son, Klaus, in her sister-in-law's care. Anna Maria considers him her “wed-
“...present” from her only brother. The final pages make clearer that the newlyweds who have been reading Rosamond’s manuscript are Anna Maria’s nephew and foster son, Klaus, and Edwin and Anna Maria’s older daughter, Marie. The incestuous ring of the marriage of cousins, whose names echo those of the sibling pair of the older generation and who were raised by the same parents, can hardly be missed. Yet the text registers nothing but extreme happiness in its parting celebration of endogamy and restored family. After sacrificing the foolish and disloyal brother whose memory is nevertheless kindly preserved, the text permits the sister’s love fulfillment in motherhood and, in an attenuated sense, even sexual expression, in cousin marriage in the next generation.

Thirty years later, mother and father are living a version of the conclusion to many a Grimm’s fairy tale: “und wenn sie nicht gestorben sind, so leben sie noch heute” (and if they haven’t died, then they are still living today). Anna Maria speaks the final lines of the novel, dictating what should be written of her at the conclusion of Rosamond’s manuscript: “She was the happiest of wives, the most beloved of mothers!” (319). Although the novel is set in the pastoral milieu of an aristocratic country estate, in its establishment of a family in which duty and desire harmonize and in which Anna Maria is settled into her prescribed role as wife and mother, the narrative recounts a founding myth of the nineteenth-century bourgeois family, one in which cousin marriage repairs the fissures created by a brother’s exogamous desire.

American publishers calculated that their readers would like this story. Within four years (1889–92) *Ihr einziger Bruder*, this “exquisite love story,” appeared in three English translations and in at least eight editions alternately titled *Her Only Brother*—translated by Jean W. Wylie for Crowell in 1888 and under the same title by E. V. Conder for Munro in 1890—and *A Sister’s Love*—translated by Margaret P. Waterman for Worthington in 1890.¹⁵ In choosing the title *A Sister’s Love*, Waterman and Worthington must have speculated that for American audiences the greater appeal of the story lay not in the valorization of the brother and his prerogatives but in the power of the sister to love that brother. An unfriendly review described the novel as steadying “the nerves, like a mild narcotic,” but the *Daily Picayune* found it a “sweet and wholesome story” in a “pleasant translation.” Worthington touted reading pleasure: the novel fastened “the reader’s attention from beginning to end.”¹⁶

Was this founding myth of the bourgeois family recognizable as a German happy ending? Griswold, who listed it under the title *Her Only Brother* and devoted three columns to it, must have thought so.¹⁷ The text does overtly indicate a German world. The opening lines set the story on an estate near the Lüneburg heath. The Hegewitz ancestral home is a “real, old-fashioned
German house; for there were dim corridors and deep niches, great vaulted rooms and large alcoves, little staircases with steep steps worn by many feet, and curious low vaulted doors” (4).

The German element additionally resonates in Heimburg’s inclusion of German poems and rhymes. Heimburg selected lesser-known poems that anchor her story in its North German setting. In the German text, a poem by the North German Klaus Groth appears in its original dialect version, for example. Likewise, near the end of the novel, children’s voices are heard singing a begging song in dialect and also the dialect rhyme for St. Martin’s Day—“Martens, Martens Vögelken / Mit Din vergoldet Flögeken.” When Susanne performs in the Hegewitz manor, she asks whether she should sing in German or Italian, and all cry out for German.

Waterman translated all of the poems into English, and as a result their dialect flavor is lost. Nevertheless, the English translation signals that the poems are to be taken as specific to this (admittedly thinly evoked culture). Waterman did, however, preserve a few linguistic signs such as Fräulein, Herr, and Frau as well as retain the telling names of the characters. Stürmer’s name (Stormer; reminiscent of the eighteenth-century Sturm und Drang), for example, boasts the signature German umlaut.

Most obviously marking this tale of duty and love as German are the contrasting portraits of Anna Maria von Hegewitz and Susanne Mattoni, each name telegraphing ethnic origin. Heimburg does not present Anna Maria uncritically, but the austere heroine quickly captures readers’ sympathy and interest as the “picture of a typical North German woman, tall, fair, slender, and clear-sighted, serene, and calm” (104). The charm of the beautiful, blonde Anna Maria is quiet, restrained, and inward; she does not shine forth in all her ethnic virtue as a “North German woman” until she displays the womanly qualities of mothering and nursing. By contrast, Susanne Mattoni, the daughter of Klaus’s tutor and a woman of uncertain origins, bears an Italian name that seals her status as other. Her dark eyes and hair and her restlessness mark her as the opposite of the North German Anna Maria. Susanne, as all that is not German, the wrong wife for Klaus the elder and the wrong mother for Klaus the younger, not only marries an Englishman but also emigrates to and dies in America. Hybrid, international, and mobile, she highlights Anna Maria’s rootedness in the German family and its land.

*Blackwood’s Magazine,* as quoted by Griswold, referred to the “venerable abode on the storm-beaten shores of the Baltic” and maintained that the characters “enlist our sympathies by their good old-fashioned german [sic] kindliness and simplicity of manners.” Taking Heimburg for a man, *The Critic* wrote of the author’s skill in rendering “country scenes and interiors, so
we can almost believe we, too, hav [sic] vegetated in a Märkisch house.” The reviewer recognized the Germany of the novel, moreover, as exhibiting “the country life of the nobles, and the strong family affection which we find in the numerous novels translated by Mrs. Wister,” or in other words, as mediating the same view of Germany as does the larger set of women’s novels under consideration here.

**Making a Good German Match:**

*Lucie’s Mistake and Lora von Tollen*

In *Herzenskrisen* (1887; *Die Gartenlaube*, nos. 1–17), a second novel involving the misguided rejection of a worthy suitor, Heimburg allowed her orphaned heroine only a narrow range of action, locating her mistake not in her German-coded sororal love and sense of duty but rather in her inexperience, her misguided wish for travel and adventure, and the bad influence of a charismatic aristocratic woman friend, Hortense. Lucie, who has never experienced the world beyond the confines of her sister’s home, is surprised to receive a proposal of marriage from Dr. Alfred Adler, whom she hardly knows. Her economic circumstances push her to accept. Trouble arises during their engagement in two forms. First, Frau Adler, the mother-in-law, dislikes Lucie from the start because she has other plans for her son, and the busy Alfred fails to intervene. Second, when her childhood friend, the erratic Hortense, tries to commit suicide, Lucie saves her life. Upon befriending Hortense anew, Lucie is unable to resist her invitation to become her traveling companion.

Friendship with Hortense comes with enormous consequences for Lucie’s emotional and financial well-being. First of all, she must break her engagement to the good doctor—American readers must have seen immediately that this is Lucie’s biggest mistake, even if they sympathized with her wish to travel. Through her travels with Hortense, Lucie becomes more sophisticated, but as time passes, she realizes not only that she has neglected her own sister, nieces, and nephews but also that she might be fond of Alfred after all. Worst of all, she has made herself dependent on a woman who could drop her as soon as she herself decides to marry. Unlike the bonds of marriage, the bonds of friendship are volatile, the text warns.

In the end Hortense does marry to the temporary endangerment of friendship. Meanwhile, both Lucie and Alfred regret their broken engagement. The novel offers little hope that this decision can be reversed until Lucie tends to her sick niece. Experienced Heimburg readers must summon
hope the moment it becomes clear that Alfred will have the opportunity to observe Lucie in a maternal role. While the novel slowly brings Lucie around to recognizing the mistake she made in turning down the security offered by a doctor’s love, Alfred himself recognizes that the inexperienced Lucie might be forgiven for making poor choices. He even acknowledges that he himself bears a little of the blame for pressing his suit so hard with her and then leaving her to the harsh regime of his mother. At the conclusion of the novel the newly married couple toasts the new year with their guests, Hortense and her husband. Once both women are married, both marriage and friendship can be affirmed.

American publishers must have thought they had a winner in Herzenskrisen. Within the space of three years it was translated in the United States under four different titles—*Friendship’s Test* (Ogilvie; 1889), *My Heart’s Darling* (Munro; 1889), *Lucie’s Mistake* (Worthington; 1890), and *Hortense* (Rand; 1891)—helping fuel a small boom in Heimburg translations in these years. Did *Lucie’s Mistake*, however, signal to American readers that it originated in a foreign culture or that it mediated information about such a culture? The *Literary World* thought so. The “pictures of German family life in the Oberförster’s home, at Frau Steuerräthin’s, and at the Baron’s,” the reviewer declared, “are vivid.”

Heimburg’s modest literary achievement in this novel is in fact to locate a romance plot, complete with ritual death, in a differentiated and stratified social world. While Lucie appears to act in this social imaginary as an individual who can make mistakes and yet ultimately choose to be reconciled with her fiancé, the novel (even in translation) also overtly flags this setting as German, thereby suggesting that Lucie is a national type. The forester brother-in-law, Hortense’s country estate, the names of the characters, and place names all telegraph German origins. One scene takes place in the Zwinger museum in Dresden before Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*—an Italian painting, to be sure, but a German tourist destination. Furthermore, when Lucie’s beaming face reveals that her fortunes have been reversed, a French governess makes explicit that there is something particularly German about the heroine, exclaiming, “How extraordinary you German women are!”

More important, the text locates its affirmation of the middle-class marriage that Lucie and Alfred contract in the very décor of a German home in a painted windowpane.

Painted glass in the form of a diptych depicts a newly married sixteenth-century couple, Werner and Barbara Grundmann, in patrician dress. An accompanying verse expresses the view of marriage that allegedly prevailed when this one was contracted. Davis, the translator for Worthington, chose to leave the quaint motto in German, thus presenting it as conveying a par-
particularly German sentiment: “Wo Er ist fest und treu gesinnt / Und Sie mit Demut dem hause [sic] dient, / Und Gotteswort wird recht gesehen, / Da ist ein reiches Glück besichert. / Lübeck anno domini 1536” (Where he is steadfast and true / And she serves the house in humility / And properly honors God’s word, / There rich happiness is granted [my translation]).24 Alfred envies the long-dead Werner and regrets that no such happiness is possible in his day, yet Barbara reminds him of Lucie. His reaction to this German artifact confirms that all will end well after all and, moreover, that their happiness will epitomize a long-standing German ideal of conjugal bliss.

If Lucie’s Mistake resembles Her Only Brother in the heroine’s rejection of a suitor whom she actually loves, Heimburg’s Lore von Tollen (1889; Die Gartenlaube, nos. 1–19) returns to the bad-brother plot coupled with a family’s impoverishment. Immediately available in the United States in two different translations—J. W. Davis’s Lora: The Major’s Daughter with Worthington (1889) and Lenore von Tollen with Munro (1890)—Heimburg’s Lora recounts how both a bad brother and a bad sister jeopardize the heroine’s marriage to her true love, the schoolteacher Dr. Schönberg.25

As opposed to the lightly sketched German milieu in Lucie’s Mistake and Her Only Brother, the setting of Lore von Tollen is more fully rendered as a German one, indeed, one founded in the specific social conditions of the German home towns. American reviews picked up immediately on this German flavoring. The Catholic World pronounced the novel “a natural unaffected and purely domestic story of a sort on which our german [sic] kinsmen seem to have a patent,” and the Literary World noted of the heroine, “There is a Teutonic simplicity about her which makes her a fascinating heroin [sic].” The Athenäum likewise praised Heimburg for succeeding “in presenting an attractive heroin of a thoroly german type [sic].”26

The opening lines of Lora situate the story in an aristocratic Prussian military family, not only by referring to the mother of the family as “Frau Majorin von Tollen,” in Davis’s translation, but also by noting how the autumn sun “played about the point of an infantry helmet,” thus alluding to the headgear internationally coded as German.27 We soon learn that we are in the small town of Westenberg situated not far from Hamburg in the direction of Berlin. Provincial Westenberg also harrowingly provides the setting for Heimburg’s Um fremde Schuld (1895), translated in North America as For Another’s Fault. In imaginary Westenberg one hears a faint German echo of Thomas Hardy’s imaginary English Wessex.

In her room Lora has a portrait of the Prussian queen Louise of sainted memory, along with a second memento of the German Wars of Liberation, a writing desk that belonged to the popular Prince Louis Ferdinand when
he was quartered in Donnerstadt for maneuvers. Lora’s father, furthermore, is confined to a wheelchair as a result of his wounds in a war from which he returned victorious a decade earlier—presumably the Franco-Prussian War. The aristocratic von Tollen family thus has deep roots in the Prussian military and in Prussian history. Their poverty has, however, banished them from the center of that history to the more affordable home town.

In addition to the Prussian military types, several other characters enter the picture as quintessentially German. With her side curls and girlish occupation of making dolls, Lora’s Aunt Melitta, for example, emerges from a German Biedermeier painting. Dr. Ernest Schönberg also bears German markers. The son of a pastor, this German teacher is writing a book called “The Reformation in the old Mark” (268).

Heimburg likewise depicts the many obstacles to happiness as rooted in German social conditions: aristocratic prejudice against alliances with the middle classes; spoiled, incorrigible, and unrepentant aristocratic sons who are expected to pursue a career in the military; the relative helplessness of impoverished aristocrats; the subjection of sisters to the whims of brothers; and the limited choices of daughters in straitened economic circumstances. Despite this oppressive social reality, her ne’er-do-well brother’s emigration to America, a coerced and short-lived marriage of convenience to the vulgar Adalbert Becher, and her disloyal sister Katie’s death, Lora is rewarded for her patient virtue with a happy marriage to Ernest. In the final chapter the aristocratic Lora and the middle-class Ernest, after taking tea in the parsonage with Ernest’s mother, Aunt Melitta, and Frau von Tollen, are sitting in their cozy parlor with its quintessentially German olive-green porcelain stove, recalling their honeymoon in Italy. Their bliss signals the defeat of the aristocracy and its prejudices as well as a triumph over the nouveaux riches who wish to join that caste.

Were it not for the final marriages—the happy endings—Heimburg’s novels could have told American readers that the grim social reality depicted in them constituted the quintessentially German. Yet the happy ending, however contrived, signaled the contrary. As in Marlitt’s novels, no matter how populated with bigots and villains the German home town may be, it nevertheless comes across as a stage on which even the most sorely challenged virtue is ultimately rewarded. The novels thus present a simulacrum of a social world in which women are able not only to admit to their heart’s desire but also to express their feelings and win the object of that desire. Heimburg, like Marlitt, does not assert that all is right with the world but proposes that in spite of everything, happiness is attainable in this German imaginary.
Ritual Death in the Theater: 
_Hulda, A Noble Name, Violetta_

Although German happy endings are frequently founded in marriages between the bourgeoisie and the nobility, these romances do not as a rule favor extreme misalliances; they are not improbable stories in which a housemaid marries a baron. They do, however, experiment with some risky matches. Indeed, if social barriers presented the most daunting obstacle to the happy ending, some German women writers sought variations on the theme in the figure of the actress. Burdened by her public performances with the stigma of sexual availability and embodying the unsteady and roving lifestyle anathema to the German bourgeoisie, the actress could quickly introduce complications into domestic fiction. She could, moreover, be configured variously—sometimes as the heroine and sometimes as a threat to the social order. Sometimes she could be accepted and redeemed, and sometimes she had to be eliminated.

In Marlitt’s _Schillingscourt_, the marriage of Felix and Lucile must be rushed to prevent the latter from dancing on stage; one public performance is tantamount to social death. When the widowed Lucile decides after all that she wants to dance, the narrative dispatches her with a fatal illness. Felicitas’s aristocratic mother in _The Old Mam’selle’s Secret_, who foolishly eloped with a “player,” is violently eliminated at the outset of the novel in the very performance that figures her humiliation. Susanne in _Her Only Brother_ is triply burdened with the stigma of the actress. Not only was her mother an opera singer, but she herself performs. To make clear how monstrously her marriage menaces the aristocratic von Hegewitz family line, the novel assigns a constant companion and evil genius to her, one Isabella Pfannenschmidt, an ugly, aged former actress. While the text eliminates Susanne, it does not prevent her biological son from ascending to his rightful place as the heir of the estate and the father of future generations. Anna Maria’s mothering—as did Cordula’s mothering of Felicitas in _The Old Mam’selle’s Secret_ and Frau Lucian’s of her grandson, José, in _Schillingscourt_—and his marriage to his own cousin wash away the stain of his biological mother. In fact, after registering the horror of the taint of the actress, these German novels tend to be optimistic in their handling of this thematic. Even if the actress remains an outsider, her offspring find acceptance in a German society that proves elastic and forgiving.

Three novels in which actresses play a central role merit attention here, especially since all three numbered among Wister’s selections and as
a result were for decades widely available for borrowing or for purchase singly or in sets: Fanny Lewald’s *Hulda; or the Deliverer* (1874; translation of *Die Erlöserin* [1873]), Claire von Glümer’s *A Noble Name; or, Dönninghausen* ([copyright 1882] 1883; translation of *Dönninghausen* [1881]), and Ursula Zöge von Manteuffel’s *Violetta* (1886; translation of *Violette Fouquet [Deutsche Roman-Zeitung* 2 [1885]), a novel whose title invokes the heroine of Giuseppe Verdi’s *La Traviata* (1853), the French courtesan Violetta Valéry. Each novel flirts with the idea of social death brought about by public performance, and in each the initiative and virtue of the heroine revive her from the nether realm. Two conclude with the marriage of an actress and an aristocrat and ostensibly accomplish the improbable social stretch that the German fiction under scrutiny here generally avoids, thus projecting a renewed social order that reclaims the actress. The third, in which the heroine marries her childhood playmate, involves reconciliation with an aristocratic grandfather and in this manner also projects a new and elastic social order.

These three German authors, especially Lewald, wrote prolifically. Yet with the exception of these three novels, their works were barely available in translation in the United States. *Violetta* is the only one of the many novels and stories by Manteuffel to be translated in North America; *A Noble Name* is one of only two works by Glümer, and *Hulda* is the second of only a small handful of Lewald’s more than thirty novels and numerous stories, written from 1842 to 1888, to appear in American translation. Wister, who rendered all three and was known for carefully selecting books Americans would like, must have judged the thematic of social redemption to be particularly attractive to her potential readers.

By 1874, when Wister translated Lewald’s *Die Erlöserin* as *Hulda*, she and Lippincott had in effect established a series, five selections of which were novels by Marlitt, and Wister had acquired a reputation for choosing “wholesome” and entertaining literature with a German flair that invariably ended well. Lewald’s story of a country clergyman’s daughter who becomes an actress fit the emergent profile even if the actress thematic might have initially suggested that it would not.

According to a family legend based in local superstition, the Falkenhorst family awaits “the love of some fair young creature, born of the people” who will marry the family scion and thus redeem him from the curse of the “little people.”28 Descended from the Teutonic knights who colonized the Baltic, this German family retains its arrogant hegemony over the local Lithuanian population in pre-1848 Europe. The legend stems from an idea that conquerors can be redeemed only by those whom they subjugated and thus constitutes a
fantasy of social justice and change, which the author, writing post-1848, of course knew was in Europe’s future.

Although born a serf, the orphaned Lithuanian Simonena married a pastor. Hulda, their daughter, eventually marries a baron, thus completing an ascent over two generations from the most abject to the ruling class. Setting her story on the Baltic, Lewald supplied it with local color in the form of Lithuanian songs and dress. In her initial contact with the baronial family, Hulda serves as a translator, rendering the local Lithuanian subculture into German for the baronial family to admire. At the same time, she herself embodies this culture in an aesthetically pleasing, assimilated, and domesticated form. But when Baron Emanuel confesses his love for her, both families and their friends and retainers oppose the misalliance.

The death of Hulda’s mother bifurcates the plot, separating the lovers for two hundred pages. The dutiful Hulda remains with her widowed father, but when he dies, she decides to become an actress. Meanwhile, Emanuel winters in Italy as is his custom. Lewald exploits their separation in a quasi-realistic vein to make probable the marriage of social unequals. Indeed, Lewald, whose fiction generally rejects improbable fantasies of marriage, narrowed the social gap between Hulda and Emanuel over the course of the novel to accomplish her happy ending. Wister supported this realistic vein by titling Die Erlöserin (The Female Redeemer) Hulda; or the Deliverer, shifting emphasis from the fantastic-sounding redeemer role to the woman, Hulda, and thereby muting the Christian fairy-tale quality of the original and paving the way for Americans to absorb the more socially grounded features of the plot.

The long middle section that treats the lovers’ estrangement and Hulda’s ritual death is centrally important to the novel. It betrays its German origins in its debt to Goethe, exhibiting the influence, on the one hand, of his Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship in its treatment of Hulda’s three-year career on the stage as formative for her later social role and, on the other, of his Elective Affinities in its slower pace, philosophizing, and interest in marriage. In Italy, Emanuel discusses marriage and the nature of happiness with the intelligent, aristocratic Konradine. Convinced finally that companionate marriage with a social equal can bring happiness, he becomes engaged to his interlocutor. The return of the newly widowed prince, her former fiancé, thwarts this plan, and the text reaffirms passionate love as the foundation of marriage.

The meanwhile-orphaned Hulda faces the need to earn a living and determines that becoming an actress is preferable to being a governess or marrying the new pastor. Armed with talent, charm, and beauty, she soon plays female leads in a repertoire that includes the German classics: Lessing’s Emilia Galotti; Goethe’s Faust, Clavigo, and Iphigenia; and Schiller’s Kabale
und Liebe and Wallenstein. Lewald does not deign to mention the entertaining and now-forgotten plays that dominated the nineteenth-century German stage. The German theater therefore appears to offer the opportunity for the most culturally pretentious of performances and for deep education in the classics. It also presents a virtuous woman with pitfalls. While rumors circulate that she is the natural daughter of a famous actress, Hulda lives a chaste life, uncomprehending of the politics of the theater and finding herself unjustly maligned. At this juncture, Emanuel’s plot returns him to the Baltic to reconnect with Hulda. As it turns out, the theater has prepared Hulda for marriage to an aristocrat by completing her aesthetic education.

Raised in a family where “there was an unconscious worship of culture and beauty” (9), Hulda has a rudimentary aesthetic education. Her upbringing enables her initially to perceive and be attracted to Emanuel’s portrait (before she has seen the man), just as he, the refined aristocrat, is attracted to her beauty. Since sitting for the portrait, Emanuel has been disfigured by smallpox, yet the sensitive Hulda perceives his inner beauty and loves him despite his scarred face. While her early education facilitates the fairy-tale match, it is not sufficient to seal it.

In the world of novels, joining the “play-actors” could portend tragedy for the heroine. Lewald takes a different tack with the theater, using it instead as Hulda’s finishing school. Here Hulda acquires the poise and bearing of the aristocracy by means of her embodiment, as an actress, of German high culture. As a result of conscientiously “[personifying] the creations of great poets,” Hulda developed her understanding; “her strength of character increased, and she continued eagerly to pursue all the means of self-culture of which she could avail herself” (297, 335). On the final page, Emanuel’s niece notes approvingly that Hulda “wears that spray of diamonds and enamelled cornflowers on her breast just as if she had always been used to it!” (394). With the quintessential combination of duty, love, and aesthetic education, Hulda profits from a situation that in other fiction of the age would have destroyed her. Like Felicitas in The Old Mami’selle’s Secret, Hulda earns her happy ending through immersion in German culture, ultimately turning in a convincing performance of her role as the wife of a baron.

In uniting Hulda, the redeemer, and a baron named Emanuel, Lewald valorized marriage as the salvation of both man and woman. While Hulda thereby overcomes her lowly social status, marriage redeems Emanuel from the inherited guilt of the colonizers; indeed, marriage to a commoner means freedom from the past since he must forfeit his right to the entailed family estate. His children will instead inherit properties that he has acquired through hard work and business acumen; they will enjoy the refined lifestyle
of landed gentry coupled with bourgeois virtue and talent. With the name of the central character, Hulda, as the title of the translation, moreover, Lewald and Wister cryptically marked the novel's allegiance to domesticity. Hulda, the daughter born late in a happy marriage, bears the name for the goddess of domesticity in Germanic folk mythology.

The ten-page plot summary of the novel included in Rossiter Johnson's international Authors Digest devotes little space to Hulda's time in the theater, thereby suggesting that it was easy to overlook Lewald's use of the stage, in the tradition of Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, as a form of Bildung. This plot summary also obscures Lewald's reliance on German high culture to make a fairy-tale ending possible. But for those who probed a bit deeper, the message could not be missed. Hulda's stint as an actress offered such readers a pleasant fantasy of an education that occurs outside of familial supervision and of an occupation that puts "the whole world of Germany at [one's] feet" (389) and yet does not preclude domestic felicity, the proper domain of a Hulda.

American readers found the book entertaining. Even if an early review in The Nation was lukewarm, the translation went through at least ten subsequent editions. When in 1876 Publishers' Weekly posed the "prize question in fiction" concerning the then "most salable novel," Hulda appeared on an international list of forty-seven novels that had received two votes each, novels by such notable authors as Mark Twain (listed as Samuel Clemens), Hans Christian Andersen, Wilkie Collins, Longfellow, Miss Mulock, Charles Reade, Trollope, Charlotte Yonge, and Mrs. Southworth. Griswold added it to his list of German novels, and it was widely available in American public libraries, including twelve of the catalogues listed in Appendix B.

While Hulda acknowledges the precariousness of the actress's life and hints that going on the boards will irrevocably separate Hulda from Emanuel, the theater ultimately facilitates the happy ending. Manteuffel and Glümer, by contrast, construct plots that do not examine the potentially redemptive aspects of theater performance. Instead, both Violetta and A Noble Name deploy social prejudice against actresses, singers, and dancers as a hindrance to marriage and akin to social death.

In the backstory of A Noble Name, when an aristocratic woman eloped with an actor, her family disowned her. Her daughter, Johanna, must find a way to be reconciled with her stern grandfather, save her stepsister from bad influence and public performance, and recognize whom she truly loves and where she belongs. In Violetta the recently widowed General von Tref fenbach marries the eponymous heroine's mother, Beatrice, a famous opera singer. This misalliance requires him to resign his military commission and leads to his ruin when his frivolous and selfish wife runs through his money
and deserts him to return to the stage in America. Violetta atones for her mother’s wrongs by caring for her impoverished and aging stepfather. For the sake of the happy ending, she must also redeem herself in the eyes of her stepbrother, Magnus. Both novels see to it that their heroines remain suitable marriage partners despite the taint of the theater. Their eligibility inheres in their virtue, loyalty, sense of duty, and hard work.

Each novel traffics in the stereotype of the vain, ruthless, and sexually available performer: *A Noble Name* reproduces it in the untalented Helena and in Carlo Batti, the circus impresario, and his circle; *Violetta* does so in the beautiful Beatrice. The crisis for each daughter of a player-parent, one that potentially leads to public performance, arises, however, as a result of economic necessity as it did in *Hulda*. Each work makes clear the difficulty of earning a living in an unforgiving world in which women’s opportunities are limited. Like *Hulda*, these texts also view acting as a profession that requires talent and not simply as dubious and dishonorable. Manteuffel’s Violetta has talent but does not want it; Glümer’s Johanna has none and cannot hope to succeed on the stage like her father. Johanna is, however, an excellent horsewoman with the skill to perform in an equestrian circus act. In the end she resists the pressure to perform, for, as the novel makes clear, acting is one thing; circus performance is anathema.

Glümer’s novel provides an interesting twist when Johanna avoids social ruin by becoming a writer. The heroine thereby draws on the artistic sensibility that had once caused her to wish to become an actor like her father. Fiction writing is less risky than public performance of any kind, for she can conceal her identity under a pseudonym. Having followed that impulse, Johanna learns “to rejoice . . . in her work for its own sake, in her gradual improvement and success, and the result which she achieved,” sustained by Goethe’s exhortation “Go to work and help yourself for the present, and hope and trust in God for the future.” Her initial desire to go on the stage, she realizes, was only “a misconception of [her] task,” and in a gesture of stewardship, she explains that she must cultivate “the one talent entrusted to [her]” (330–31). To underline the importance of such creative work, Glümer brings Grandfather Dönninghausen to Johanna at her writing table for the reconciliation; Johanna will not return to him unless she can bring her work with her. The novel concludes on the baron’s eightieth birthday. Johanna is married to her faithful childhood friend, who is shortly to become a university professor of medicine. The couple plan a quiet domestic life devoted to their work. In the final line of the novel, Grandfather Dönninghausen pronounces the “half-blood” aristocrat Johanna “the best Dönninghausen that ever lived,” though Johanna never actually bore that noble name (360).
In Glümer’s telling, noble character, defined in terms of duty, loyalty, sentiment, and work, blots out the taint of public performance, and artistry endures.

Wister’s name guaranteed the circulation of *A Noble Name* from the start; the novel remained available for borrowing or purchase over several decades, having been reprinted at least four times. The *Independent* noted its similarities to others on Wister’s list, pronouncing it a “particularly interesting, healthful, well-constructed one.” “No young novel reader will be the worse for reading it,” the reviewer declared, pointing to the heroine’s nobility of character. The same journal remarked two years later that by translating *A Noble Name* along with other German novels Wister had “signally widened the acquaintance of many readers of only our language with some delightfully spirited German studies of domestic life.” While the message of the story could be read universally, this review recognized and welcomed German particularity in the work.

In *Violetta* Manteuffel erects obstacles to her theater-tainted heroine’s happiness by characterizing Magnus, her aristocratic stepbrother, as a man whose ideals of womanhood were formed by his long-suffering mother and his pious childhood sweetheart. Manteuffel must make Violetta acceptable to Magnus’s high standards of womanhood and also make Magnus himself bend a little.

To secure the heroine’s happy ending, the text makes clear from the start that she does not want to perform in public. Refusing to be the object of men’s gazes, the talented Violetta shrinks from dancing on stage. When her mother tries to force her debut, Violetta deliberately falls from her perch in the elaborate stage scenery, thus cutting short her dancing career. Since she has not completed a performance, Magnus can see in her the possibility for redemption. Yet when her charm, beauty, and virtue begin to attract him, he flees to Brazil; he cannot imagine a woman of Violetta’s dubious origins presiding over his mother’s estate.

Meanwhile, a destitute General von Treffenbach must rely on Violetta for financial support. Possessing a voice equal to her mother’s but abhoring the stage, Violetta embarks on a successful opera career. The tubercular fate of the diva seems imminent when the heroine appears weak and coughing. But tragedy is not the genre in which this novel operates. In the end Magnus marries Violetta despite her protests of her unworthiness. As in Lewald’s and Glümer’s works, the text concludes with an affirmation of the heroine’s virtue, which trumps social origin and occupation, posing the rhetorical question “whether any Treffenbach who ever lived, or who ever can live, was or can be worthy a [sic] Violetta Fouquet.”
Advertisements for _Violetta_ quoted the _New York Tribune_ and the _Boston Home Journal_: Violetta was a “happy conception,” the Tribune declared, and the _Home Journal_ pointed out that Wister’s name on the title page as the “translator of a German story” had come to guarantee that the book was of “high merit and fascinating interest.” This praise received an enthusiastic second in several reviews, including one from _The Chautauquan_, which declared, “a translation from a popular German work by Mrs. A. L. Wister is always welcome.” _The Critic_ found _Violetta_ the best among “Mrs. Wister’s graceful translations of pretty German stories” and touted it as providing the reader with exciting entertainment: “it has not a dull page, nor a superfluous paragraph, nor an uninteresting character in it.” _The Literary World_ remarked on it as an informative picture of contemporary Germany, noting that there was “plenty of high German life” in it and that “one may make reputable acquaintance with types and forms of present society under the Emperor William which are not without interest.” _The Critic_, in contrast, took care to point out that it gave “a noble view of life” and thus served to edify. These reviews operate with a largely flattering idea of generic German fiction, one encouraged by Lippincott in advertisements for Wister’s series of German translations, an idea that understands this literature as essentially optimistic and diverting. Marketed as a “charming summer novel” with situations “full of interest” and dialogue that was “bright and vigorous,” _Violetta_ took its place beside a host of similar fiction including _Hulda_ and _A Noble Name._

If in _Daisy Miller_ (1879) and _The Portrait of a Lady_ (1881) Henry James introduced naïve American heroines in conflict with, even victimized by, European society and thus portrayed Europe as sophisticated, alien, and dangerous to American women, these three novels featured Germany in a different light. Here German regions provided the capacious stage on which virtuous and dutiful heroines, “happy conceptions,” could overcome the threat of social death. In all three, creative work and talent are essential to the happy ending and do not diminish femininity. What is more, all three female protagonists enjoy unconventional latitude of action before inevitably and blissfully settling into marriage.

**The Woman Question and the Pressure of the Happy Ending:**

*Only a Girl*_

Lewald, Glümer, and Manteuffel portrayed virtuous, dutiful, and talented women who earn a living in the arts out of necessity and nevertheless marry
desirable partners who secure their respectable social standing. Glümer even allowed her heroine a creative life as a novel after her marriage. Wilhelmine von Hillern, by contrast, created an odd heroine who wants to pursue scientific research and whose happy ending seems imperiled throughout by her inability to conform to nineteenth-century codes of femininity. On the surface, Hillern’s *Arzt der Seele* delivers a culturally conservative message that limits women’s endeavors, one based on essentialist arguments that appear to reach full flower in the novel’s concluding chapter, in which the heroine marries and gives birth to a daughter.

Nineteenth-century American cultural pundits who read the novel in the original German heard this conservative message, maintaining that the novel was no friend of women’s rights. Reviewers of the American translation who praised the “purity” of the book’s tone and “the sound moral lesson it teaches” or pronounced the novel “timely” and “forcible” may have likewise alluded obliquely to that message. Certainly, charges of conservatism and antifeminism are, at first glance, difficult to dispute. Yet, upon examination, fissures become visible that undercut the surface message, especially when the novel is read in English translation and at a remove from the realities of its German origins. The novel in fact permits a variety of readings. As we shall see upon close examination of the happy ending, a more progressive one was available even to nineteenth-century American readers.

Although he identifies Hillern’s novel as an influence on George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, E. A. McCobb has few kind words for it, mistakenly asserting that it fell quickly into oblivion. In point of fact, the book found willing readers in Germany and in America, in English, for at least forty years. *Arzt der Seele* first appeared in Prussia in two versions in 1869: as a serialized novel in the *Deutsche Roman-Zeitung* and as a four-volume book. The following year Lippincott published Wister’s rendering of the serialized version. It was her fourth translation of popular novels by German women, and of these, it was her first by any woman besides Marlitt. If Wister and Lippincott anticipated continued success with Wister’s *Only a Girl*, they calculated correctly.

On May 7, 1870, the *New York Times* advertised *Only a Girl: or A Physician for the Soul* as “Just ready. A book for the times.” Subsequently, Lippincott reprinted the book at least nine times up to and including 1898. Over the course of these three decades the book was regularly and aggressively advertised under Wister’s name for purchase individually or in a set along with Wister’s other “popular translations from the German.” Lists of nineteenth-century library holdings and other contemporary sources testify to the wide availability of the book in English. In 1893, for example, the U.S. Bureau of Education recommended Wister’s *Only a Girl* as one among “5000
volumes for a popular library” in a catalogue assembled by the American Library Association for the Columbian Exposition. All thirteen catalogues in Appendix B indicate the availability of Wister’s translation Only a Girl. In 1896 the novel merited an entry in the Library of the World’s Best Literature. One additional and heavily plagiarized translation, to which we will return below, also circulated in North America.

What, then, did this popular novel from Germany, “full of German quaintness,” have to say for more than forty years to American readers who expected happy endings from their popular German books and who, upon its first publication just a year after the appearance of John Stuart Mill’s The Subjection of Women in England, were moving into a period of engagement with the woman question? In 1874 an American review of Marlitt’s The Second Wife indicated that novel readers were prepared to entertain the possibility that women could be both intellectual and loving. They liked the portrayal in Marlitt’s novel of the “highest ideal of womanhood and the most intelligent ideas as to feminine culture,” ideas according to which “a woman may cultivate her intellect without prejudice to her heart . . . write and paint and study science without neglecting those softer duties that attach to her sex.” Only a Girl sets out to accomplish something like what this reviewer praised in The Second Wife, but while Hillern’s Ernestine marries as she must to satisfy readers, the journey proves very difficult. She sacrifices to reach her happy ending, whereas, as we shall see in chapter 5, Marlitt’s Juliane agilely slips into hers.

Only a Girl opens with an arresting portrait of a neglected and abused eight-year-old. Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales serve throughout as points of reference for her story—her loneliness and neglect, her introversion and individualism, her radical estrangement from society, and her inarticulate longing for love. With allusions to “The Ugly Duckling,” “The Little Mermaid,” “The Snow Queen,” and other tales by the internationally known Andersen, Hillern tips her hand as to her wish to convey the redemptive power of love. The text holds out the hope that the ugly duckling will transform into a swan, but the question remains as to what this swan can be in the confining social world evoked in this novel.

As a child Ernestine von Hartwich is painfully aware that her father despises her as “only a girl,” yet she does not know how to be a girl, for she has had no mother to teach her. Beginning with a depiction of her visit to a children’s party where her oddness makes Ernestine the object of the aggression of parents and children alike, Hillern charts a thorny course for her heroine. The novel vacillates between critically assessing what it means to be a woman in this society and urging that women live within its norms for
the sake of their happiness. It sharpens the question as to whether Ernestine will marry through the plot device of a will dictating that if she dies childless her uncle Leuthold will inherit her fortune. Meaning to render her both unmarriageable and undesirous of marriage, Leuthold raises her as an atheist and aspiring physiologist. In her gender-deviant behavior, a nearly grown-up Ernestine proves troubling and divisive to the local peasants, the landed gentry, and the all-male university.

Even as it portrays society’s horror of Ernestine, eliciting more sympathy with her than with her tormenters, the text stacks the deck against her. When she falls ill, poor health is attributed to her scientific pursuits, since they are, after all, contrary to woman’s nature. The text implies that the obsessive and ambitious scientific study stunts Ernestine’s emotional growth, causing her to repress her feelings and renounce conjugal bliss and sexual fulfillment. She hears the “voice of nature,” but her uncle Leuthold urges her to ignore it by seeking the “warm throb of life” in vivisection at the dissecting table. His plan to keep Ernestine from marrying would succeed were it not for Johannes Möllner, who from the start sees in her the swan she will become in her white wedding gown at the end of the book.

Although it ultimately shelters a newly devout Ernestine in matrimony, the novel devotes substantial space to unsettling readers. For more than 540 pages it explores questions of religion and science, emancipation of the flesh, women’s social roles, women’s admission to the university, and their ability to do science. Even as Johannes pursues Ernestine, the text pushes readers to engage with these questions, make contact with an expanded intellectual world, and imagine extended, if frightening, possibilities. Only a Girl also puts unappealing models of femininity on display for critical scrutiny, and in featuring a series of unflattering portraits of women as they have developed in this conservative social world, it hardly suggests that the heroine should reproduce these negative examples. Rather, it encourages sympathy with a beautiful and intelligent, though odd, heroine and asserts that those who find “an expression of thoughtfulness” “strange and gloomy” are “common people”; those in the comfortable educated classes by contrast ought to find the combination of intelligence and beauty alluring (161). Although thwarting Ernestine’s wish for university study, the text debunks stereotypes of intelligent women as unattractive and barren, ultimately depositing the requisite baby in Ernestine’s arms.

As in the case of Gold Elsie, Hillern’s happy ending, though clichéd, spared contemporary women readers the potentially frightening consequences of pursuing the issues the novel raises; it hoped instead for the possibility of a felicitous compromise that enabled women to take part in the intellectual
labor of the day, to experiment and make mistakes, and still to experience emotional and sexual fulfillment in the safe harbor of marriage.

To reach its happy ending in marriage, the text does not argue for barring all women from university study. Instead, it convincingly airs the possibility of that study. In reproducing the deliberations of the professors of medicine and philosophy at the local university, it recreates the exclusive, masculine “academic citizenship” of the German universities of the day and subjects it to critical scrutiny. Those supporting Ernestine’s admission easily deflate the contentions of those against it. As one character powerfully asserts, science is objective and gender blind; it welcomes everyone ready to labor on its behalf. The rehearsing of the arguments in favor of women’s study compellingly familiarizes readers with them. The text asks in effect why a female genius cannot be admitted to the university when so many stupid men are and then proceeds to demonstrate that some male scientists are not only stupid but also corrupt and deserving of ostracism from the scientific community.

Ernestine herself is eloquent on the subject of women’s pursuit of science and the history of that pursuit. She maintains that the learned Dorothea Rodde, who died in 1824, would not have been so quickly forgotten had she been a man, noting, moreover, that the history of extraordinary ability in women ought not to be less interesting than the natural history of the ape. Displaying knowledge of contemporary physiology, she again asserts women’s equality by discrediting then-current arguments about brain weight and, in particular, by demonstrating how brain weight as an indicator of intelligence would deny the intelligence of some brilliant men (308–9). The shocked and offended reaction of all assembled to her razor-sharp reasoning by no means invites readers to side with social norms against her. Instead, readers conditioned to empathize with the central female figure in popular novels can easily feel sympathy for the outspoken and socially inept Ernestine.

Those against Ernestine’s university study, however, carry the day when Johannes Möllner sides with them, assuming a paternalistic role in protecting her womanhood against her scholarly ambition and drive. Were it not for the dogged and ultimately rewarded efforts of Johannes, to whom all of the characters defer, the text would exhibit more progressive leanings. Even so, Johannes does not always come off well. While he acknowledges the heroine’s ability to “look beyond the individual to the universal” and by implication her worthiness to practice science, he himself unapologetically acts out of individual (and not universal) interests; he votes against her study because he wants to marry her. Alert readers can readily see the inconsistency, especially since the novel has just deflated the illogical arguments the
male professors have launched against Ernestine’s university study. In fact, in 1877 the National Quarterly Review did recognize this inconsistency and railed against Johannes’s perfidy, even contending provocatively that Ernestine’s uncle was a more appealing figure since he allowed the heroine a scientific education.54

In posing the woman question in terms of women’s active involvement in scientific study and research, Hillern entertained a then nearly unthinkable extreme that protofeminist novelists of the period seldom broached.55 In nineteenth-century novels, women’s impulses to freedom tend instead to reside in the practice of the arts—painting, or writing novels, or even acting—and not science. After all, Arthur Schopenhauer had asserted in his much-cited essay “Über die Weiber” that women lacked the power to reason as well as a sense for and receptivity to music, poetry, and art. Protofeminists thus had much to refute even when they entertained the possibility of women’s achievement in the arts. By taking up the dominant and masculinized academic discipline of the age, Hillern, who had been an actress and was now writing novels, made women’s pursuit of artistic endeavors seem by comparison uncontroversial.

Hillern’s woman scientist had to marry in the end; the market success of the novel at home and abroad depended on it. Wister, for one, would not have translated this novel if it had lacked the happy ending of marriage and family. The thirty-nine German novels and novellas by women and men that she rendered for the American market all end with marriage or remarriage; the happy ending belonged, as it were, to her brand. How, then, does a novel that so vividly weighs the possibility of women’s pursuit of science, a pursuit that virtually barred women from marriage, reach the expected happy ending without simply becoming a simpering apology for the status quo? The solution, though conforming, exhibits unconventional features that suggest that Hillern was not prepared merely to confine her heroine in marital bliss.

First, the novel by no means idealizes marriage as a universal good. McCobb rightly observes, “even though the heroine is being propelled towards marital bliss, the most interesting, albeit brief, glimpses of marriage are those implying domestic tension.”56 Unflattering portraits of bad marriages are legion. Ernestine’s Aunt Bertha and Uncle Leuthold are hideously mismatched, Leuthold having wedded this innkeeper’s daughter for her money. The adulterous Herbert’s marriage is still more distasteful, and the text vividly depicts the sufferings of his sickly wife. Angelika and the conservative professor Moritz love one another, but Moritz’s possessiveness and self-importance do not win reader approbation for their marital life. If readers rejoice in the union of Ernestine and Johannes, then they must see it as
a myth of conjugal bliss against the odds. Contrasting with the flawed marriages that otherwise dot the fictive landscape, this match pairs a superior man with a superior woman who is nearly his intellectual equal, not merely his dim but virtuous counterpart. With this exceptional couple, Hillern took a tiny step toward imagining greater parity in marriage.

The heroine's choice and sacrifice, furthermore, enable the marriage. Johannes procures for Ernestine an offer of a position as teacher of natural science in St. Petersburg. There she can pursue her scientific studies at the university and earn a living. On the other hand, she can choose Johannes, renouncing “brilliant prospects” and a “great future” for his sake (536). Having provided options, Johannes again makes his wishes known, and these prevail. Yet the stodgy professor has not only acknowledged Ernestine’s scientific aptitude but finally admitted that some women should be admitted to study (albeit in Russia). Most importantly, he recognizes that to give up science means sacrifice, an act of the will. To renounce a career in science is thus portrayed neither as a simple matter of deflection from error and thus submission to discipline from without nor as a mere subsiding into nature; rather, it requires self-discipline. Ernestine, who once fumed at the story of the learned Rodde, who upon marriage “arrested her scientific development in the bud,” knows what matrimony could mean for herself (305).

But Ernestine is no longer alone in her understanding of the depth of her impending loss. If, as Radway claims, romance permits identification with the heroine “at the moment of her greatest success, that is, when she secures the attention and recognition of her culture’s most powerful and essential representative, a man,” thus functioning as “a sign of a woman’s attainment of legitimacy and personhood,” then in this case that recognition resides in the acknowledgment by Johannes that to marry requires of Ernestine a conscious decision and active sacrifice. Indeed, in exercising her will, she proves the hypothesis of her treatise, “Reflex Motion in its Relation to Free Agency,” that reflexive reactions can be ruled by the will. Here she recounted having trained herself not to scream at the sound of a gunshot through force of will. Now she exercises that faculty in order to marry. By design or not, Hillern’s novel links the threat of violence inhering in a gunshot with the threat of damage in marriage, proposing in each case that women can learn to exercise reason and discipline themselves to reach an outcome that they themselves determine.

A number of details of the final scenario of the concluding chapter also demand reconsideration. Here Hillern reinserts the science that Ernestine supposedly set aside to marry, thus imagining that marriage in the end is not a matter of either-or. The heroine continues to pursue science, “invaluable to
Johannes as a scientific companion and assistant. He could as ill spare her at his desk or in his laboratory as at the head of his household” (542). Likewise, the birth of a daughter, as an element of the happy ending, provides a layer of ambiguity. It especially does so if readers recall the first chapter in which the confused Ernestine reports that her mother “died because I was not a boy” (44). Wouldn’t the grown-up Ernestine want a boy? Indeed, within the economy of nineteenth-century fiction, as in Gold Elsie, for example, the birth of a boy figures the vigor of the union, the viability of the family, and the mother’s vicarious agency. Ernestine never actually expresses her wishes—preference for a boy is merely attributed to her by another character—and the text instead bestows a girl on the singular couple, implying that a daughter might function like a son. If Ernestine happily welcomes a daughter into the world, meaning to train her “to be what a true woman should be” so that she will one day say to “one whom she loves . . . ‘Thank God that I am a woman, and that I am yours’” (543), she will do so to help that daughter lay claim to the promise of love and marriage. Nevertheless, the text never indicates that the happy parents will force their daughter to eschew intellectual pursuits. She will, after all, learn science from her father and her mother. In other words, Hillern’s novel supplies the safe ending that readers desired, but the daughter carries new possibility into the future.

In the conservative moment of closure, moreover, readers need not forget what has gone before. Rather, they may be able to recall the possibilities and the turmoil that preceded the novel’s end. Furthermore, as Natalie Davis famously observed of unruly women and festive rituals of inversion in early modern France, the parading of gender-deviant behavior can reinforce the status quo yet also undermine it. Temporary airing of the possibility of the exceptional woman was, in Davis’s words, “also a resource for feminist reflection on women’s capacities” and “enriched the fantasy of a few real women.”58 Intentionally or not, Hillern likewise enriched the fantasy of a few real women with her novel.

The two English translations, one British and one American, provide further clues to the ways the novel could be read across cultures in the nineteenth century, read both conservatively and cautiously progressively. In the final chapter Moritz, to whom readers have learned not to attribute insight, exclaims, “Wie es der Johannes nur angefangen haben muß, den Querkopf zurecht zu setzen?” (How ever did Johannes go about setting that oddball/hardheaded person aright? [my translation]). Wister’s translation reads, however, “Johannes must have been puzzled indeed to know how to train that scatterbrain” (541; my italics).59 When Ernestine is understood as a “scatterbrain” rather than a “Querkopf” (stubborn person, oddball), Johannes’s
task becomes something altogether different. “Querkopf” in either of its meanings implies the need for Ernestine to submit when Johannes imposes a rigorous regimen on her against her will. “Scatterbrain,” on the other hand, indicates that Ernestine must learn to exercise her will, not to suppress it. She must exercise self-discipline to collect herself and tend to her own desires even if under male tutelage. Neither scenario passes muster in the present day, but they do diverge somewhat in their ideas about what enables happiness.

Wister’s translation also downplays the housewifely attributes that the undomestic heroine, who once confused salad oil with heating oil, must acquire for the sake of her happy ending. As a married woman, Wister’s freely translated Ernestine is a “jewel of a woman . . . who fulfils every duty, even those that she once considered so dull and commonplace!” (542). Hillern’s Ernestine is by contrast a “Prachtweib” (splendid woman) who has become a wonderful “Hausfrau” (housewife): “Was uns Andern alle Mühe und alle Zeit in Anspruch nimmt, das macht sie spielend nebenher, als etwas ganz Selbstverständliches, Untergeordnetes, worüber gar kein Wort weiter zu ver- lören [sic] ist—und macht es besser als wir Alle” (237; Those things that cost the rest of us all kinds of effort and time she does easily alongside other things as though taking care of them were a matter of course and secondary and not worth wasting words on; and she does it better than all of us [my translation]). While Hillern’s “housewife” strives to be the best at everything (even things of secondary importance), Wister’s “jewel” merely fulfills her obligations, duties she perhaps still finds “dull and commonplace.” The final lines of the novel, which Ernestine speaks “gratefully” to Johannes, invoke the suffering and sacrifice that have brought her to marriage and family: “your medicines were very bitter,” she tells him, “but they were my salvation” (544). The word “bitter”—the same word in both English and German—jars, casting doubt on the perfect happiness of the ending and thus the ostensibly conservative message.

Wister’s translation retains the word “bitter” and the closing paragraph in Ernestine’s voice. Ernestine, a Novel (1879, American edition 1881 [reprinted 1902]), translated by the British Anglican priest Sabine Baring-Gould, ends differently. While Baring-Gould otherwise plagiarizes Wister verbatim in the final chapter, he omits the last four paragraphs. He must have noticed the potentially disruptive effects of “bitter” and determined to eliminate them, thus keeping Ernestine from alluding to the pain of conforming in the moment of closure and preventing her from having the final word on her own destiny. In his version Johannes speaks for her, concluding piously: “She is reconciled at last to the destiny of her sex.”

Seven of the thirteen libraries
listed in Appendix B held Wister’s translation only. Patrons of the remaining six, however, could have read either Wister’s or Baring-Gould’s translation. Depending upon which translation they picked up, they would have heard a significantly different message on the final page of the novel.

The first half of the title of Wister’s translation, *Only a Girl; or A Physician for the Soul*, likewise favors a cautiously progressive reading of Hillern’s novel. By placing the title of the first chapter of the German original in front of the original book title, *Arzt der Seele*, Wister shifted attention from Johannes, the “physician of the soul,” to the social cause of Ernestine’s suffering, thus encouraging a sympathetic reading of her furious struggles. The unfairness of her fate signaled in the title, the fact that she is mistreated, misunderstood, impoverished, and forced to make a hard choice because she is “only a girl” may in the end have helped extend the afterlife of this novel in nineteenth-century America. The novel did not so much answer the woman question as raise it—and with considerable pathos and knowledge of the opposition it faced.

A copy of the 1887 reprint edition of *Only a Girl* once owned by Amanda A. Durff is bound in a red cloth cover adorned with a rose branch on which a winged cherub perches. Beneath it, Wister’s embossed signature can be read: “Translated by Mrs. A. L. Wister.” In a steadily selling series of translations from the German that included Marlitt’s novels; the romances *Hulda, Violetta, Banned and Blessed, A Noble Name*; and many more, books whose flowery covers overtly appealed to popular taste and female readers, Hillern’s novel was still voicing the question of women’s intellectual pursuits. By 1891, however, when Amanda carefully entered her name in the book, women were beginning to be admitted to graduate study in the United States. Indeed, a generation of American women was coming to maturity that, as Sicherman points out in her study of women’s reading in the Gilded Age, “individually and collectively left an unparalleled record of public achievement—as physicians and scientists, social workers and educators.” These women “maneuvered their way from overprotected childhoods marked by extreme gender stereotyping to lives of adventure.” With new possibilities for careers, most of which meant that they would have to forego marriage, Amanda and her American sisters—including the 128 female borrowers of the book in Muncie, Indiana (1891–1902)—perhaps had more reason to worry than had their mothers whether the needs of the heart and the mind could be reconciled and whether they might be forced to choose. They perhaps also had renewed cause to take flight to ostensibly safe reading about a privileged class in a distant time in a far-off land to circle warily around the question instead of confronting it head on.
Both Regis and Radway characterize the romance novel as featuring female protagonists. Not all of these novels by German women do so, yet they share the other narrative elements outlined above. Hillern’s *Aus eigener Kraft*, translated for Lippincott as *By His Own Might* (1872), for example, recounts the trials of a man who overcomes physical disability to become a doctor and marry the woman he loves. Julie Adeline Volckhausen’s *Das Kind aus dem Ebräergang* (1870), translated as *Why Did He Not Die? or, The Child From the Ebräergang* (1871), features the abused natural son of a prominent Hamburg citizen, telling the story of his disappearance, ritual death, and subsequent resurrection as a famous painter who wins the object of his affection. E. Werner’s popular novels, in particular, tend to shift attention to the male half of the blissful couple, gradually unveiling the attractiveness of unusual and initially unprepossessing men and recounting their emergence from isolation and passivity. *Am Altar* and *Gebannt und erlöst* exemplify this focus on the hero within the patterns of the romance novel. In linking male redemption and success to a woman’s love, they make a strong appeal to female readers; at the same time, their emphasis on the hero provides more action and a broader canvas upon which to imagine the expression of subjectivity.

*Am Altar* (1871; *Die Gartenlaube*, nos. 1–17), published in 1872 by Lippincott as *At the Altar*, was the first of Werner’s novels to reach Americans in English. On September 12, 1872, not long after the serialization ended in Germany, *The Nation* listed the American translation among “recent novels.” Subsequently, the translation appeared in new American reprint editions and in two additional translations with London publishers. Finally, *At the Altar* turned up in 1895 in the pocket edition of Munro’s Seaside Library, its appearance there testifying to its enduring appeal.

*At the Altar* shares many of the elements of Marlitt’s novels: the regional setting, the social milieu of the middle class and landed aristocracy, class tensions, a lively and appealing young heroine, past transgressions that need to be atoned, family conflict, critical portraits of the aristocracy, and anti-Catholicism. It also features a happy ending founded in the union of man and wife—in the words of Werner’s narrator—“the holiest and sweetest ties that unite mankind on earth, . . . wife, and home, and family.” This conclusion is, however, reached with especial difficulty, since the protagonist is a monk. Thus in a surprise twist, the altar of the title refers not to a wedding but to monastic vows, a sacred obligation presenting an insurmountable hindrance to the marriage that readers expected to conclude such a novel.
At the Altar exhibits striking signs of postunification imperial Germany in its concern with tensions between Protestant northern Germany and Catholic southern Germany and in its critical portrait of the Catholic Church and its authorities. Bismarck's anti-Catholic Kulturkampf had begun in 1871 and lasted until 1878. When Werner wrote the novel, the May Laws of 1873, which sharply curtailed the power of the Catholic Church, had yet to be passed in the German parliament but were nevertheless on the horizon. While in 1870–71 Germans had rejoiced in the unity forged between the North German Confederation and the South German provinces to do battle against the French, in the aftermath of the founding of the Reich the cultural, religious, and political differences between North and South and long-standing regional loyalties were coming into view.

The snobbish Rhaneks, descended from old South German nobility, have many secrets that must be revealed to end the sufferings of the male protagonist, Bruno. In his youth Ottfried von Rhanek, the youngest of three brothers, married a Protestant middle-class girl in a Protestant ceremony without his parents’ consent. When the eldest Rhanek son died, Ottfried inherited the estate, because the middle brother had meanwhile become a priest. When Ottfried confessed that he had married a Protestant to his brother, the priest, the latter pronounced the marriage a sin and persuaded him to abandon his wife and their son, Bruno.

Upon his ex-wife’s death, Ottfried secretly reclaimed Bruno and, at his brother the priest’s urging, consecrated him to the church to atone for the unlawful marriage. At the same time he contracted a marriage of convenience with a Catholic of his social rank that produced one son, Ottfried Junior. Unaware that they are half brothers, Bruno and Ottfried detest one another, and both are attracted to middle-class Lucie, the sister of a North German who has recently settled in the area. Lucie dislikes Ottfried from the start, but Bruno, the monk, is hardly an appropriate match.

Chaffing against the sacred bonds forced upon him, Bruno preaches liberationist theology to the peasants, endangering the very foundations of the Catholic Church. The narrator hints that the Church may imprison and kill him. Meanwhile, Bruno struggles with his feelings for Lucie. In a titillating scene in a mountain chapel, the sexually unavailable monk and Lucie address one another by their Christian names, but Bruno remains mindful of the vow that denies him “what the ministers of your Church are allowed to possess.” The Catholic altar stands between them and they have only the choice “between renunciation and crime” (235–36).

When, however, Bruno later discovers that his uncle, the priest, is plotting his death and also learns of his own origins and baptism as a Protestant,
he feels licensed to leave the church. Now he must ask Lucie if she is willing to enter a marriage facilitated by a broken vow. The anti-Catholicism of the novel allays all pangs of conscience: marriage trumps celibacy, and a coerced vow of celibacy need not be kept. At the Altar ends as Bruno hastens “to meet the new future, his young wife at his side,” the “blue misty distance before him” as a caroling lark rises above him (343). If, as Regis claims, the romance typically concludes by projecting an idea of freedom in a renewed social order, then this conclusion fits the prototype. Moreover, it reflects the historical moment in which it originates when it figures newfound freedom and a renewed social order housed within Protestantism.

American reviews readily picked up on the “Protestant tone” of this “not uninteresting” novel. They saw the book as possessing a “German character” preserved by the translation, and the unlikely plot and happy ending did not deter them from reading the novel as a portrait of contemporary Germany. The New York Times piously remarked that, although exaggerated in detail and prejudiced against Catholicism, this “very entertaining novel . . . may be taken as a vigorous exposition of what South Germany has been under the rule of the Roman Catholic clergy; how far for purely clerical ends individual happiness has been interfered with; and how far, for the same object, right feeling and right action have been put aside.”

Eleven years later, Werner returned to a South German Alpine setting where the machinations of a Catholic priest again impede the happiness of the central couple and endanger the gullible villagers. Serialized in 1883 (Die Gartenlaube, nos. 1–29), Gebannt und erlöst was multiply translated in North America. Well known by 1883, Werner had over the intervening decade caught on with American readers; nine of her works had appeared in English translation as books, some of them in multiple renderings and editions. The year 1883 alone saw the publication of four new translations of four different novels by Werner. Lippincott promoted Wister’s translation Banned and Blessed (1883) with a quotation from the Boston Courier as “by far the strongest of [Werner’s] stories” whose novels are “always readable and to the highest degree entertaining.” Publishers’ Weekly listed Banned and Blessed along with twelve additional works, including novels by Daudet, Zola, and five male German authors, as “the chief translations in fiction” of 1883. In short, the publishers expected the book to be read and it was.

Banned and Blessed plots the redemption of three men, relying on the recently widowed Anna to help bring it about. Raimund von Werdenfels must regain her love; his cousin and ward, Paul, must transfer his love for her to her younger sister; and Gregor Wilmut the priest, her cousin and former guardian, must renounce his love for her. The narrative ties Raimund’s
redemption and the union of Raimund and Anna to the establishment of a new order in the rural setting, one that promises the peasants a better life and expels the priest and the noxious influence of the Church. Set in the countryside on the estates of the aristocracy and in the neighboring villages and featuring alliances of male aristocrats and bourgeois women, Banned and Blessed reproduces the social conditions that tend to characterize the German novels by women translated for Americans.

Gregor, who had long fought his attraction to his ward, Anna, arranged her marriage to a rich aristocrat fifty years her senior. The widowed Anna returns to become a disturbing presence in the Alpine countryside where her first love, the aristocratic Raimund, has become a brooding recluse on account of quarrels with his father over his love for the then-bourgeois Anna, the villagers’ suspicions of his culpability in an unsolved case of arson and homicide, and the loss of Anna, who, encouraged by Gregor, shares these suspicions. Anna’s return awakens Raimund from his lethargy, and he prepares to work on behalf of the village, even though the peasants deeply resent him. His rehabilitation is to be accomplished through a flood control project.

Long ago Raimund’s autocratic father erected a floodwall to protect the manor house and the surrounding lands but ignored the safety of the village. To compensate for his father’s crass irresponsibility, Raimund determines to build a dam at his own expense. However, since Gregor has persuaded the villagers to ask for government assistance instead, Raimund fails to gain their cooperation and the dam is not built. The spring thaw brings about the catastrophe adumbrated by the novel’s first mention of the village’s vulnerability, providing Raimund with the opportunity to redeem himself. To save the village, he breaches the old floodwall, diverting the waters toward his castle, park, and fertile fields. Moreover, imperilling his own life, he rescues the child of the man he is rumored to have murdered.

This sacrifice changes the lay of the land. No longer a reclusive dreamer, Raimund enters “life and the world with [Anna] beside [him]” and now has the grateful villagers “well in hand” in a relationship of mutual trust. Like At the Altar, the novel concludes with a flowery assertion that the happy couple and the community have achieved freedom from the past: “The old ban . . . had vanished like the clouds and mist of those stormy spring days, and a free and blessed life was dawning” (390).

The optimism of the happy ending of Banned and Blessed stands out in sharp relief when compared with the tragic conclusion of a now-canonical German novella from the same decade: Theodor Storm’s Der Schimmelreiter (1888). Storm, who also occasionally published in Die Gartenlaube, had likely read Werner’s novel or at least knew of it. The two works share several
motifs including a male protagonist who must prove his manhood; a water control project; bad relations between the protagonist, who occupies a position of authority, and his community; affirmation of marriage; a male nemesis who spreads falsehoods; sacrifice; atonement; and a devastating flood. Storm’s novella, famous for its triple narrative frame; atmospheric evocation of regional peasant culture; descriptions of the conception, financing, and building of a dike; and its ambiguous presentation of the aloof Hauke Haien not only offers a thick account of the hero’s psychological development and his fraught relations with the village but also ends with his sacrificial suicide by drowning and the total destruction of his family. His legacy consists of a ghost story that would have been anathema to his rationalist sensibilities and of the dike itself, which remains standing one hundred years later.

Hauke has been called a “Gründertyp,” that is, a male type that emerged in postunification Germany, the ruthless individualist determined to profit through speculation and technology. Critics, however, remain divided as to whether the novella affirms or rejects this type, interpretation having been complicated by the conflicting evidence of the multiple narrative frames. Is Hauke a genius defeated by the stupidity of the backward villagers, or is he an arrogant loner lacking in self-knowledge and feeling? The work supplies evidence for both readings, projecting complexity into human relations and actions. Affirming her male protagonist’s accession to leadership through work, sacrifice, righteousness, far-sightedness, and sheer force of will, Wer ner, by contrast, offers a less ambiguous view, one in keeping with the “habitual tone of confidence in human mastery” of nature that characterized the liberal optimism of the age. Suffering only material loss, Raimund faces a future in which he will be able to exercise his will and talent for promoting communal good, sustained by a happy marriage to a woman he loves.

Storm’s vivid evocation of regional German culture and the building of a dike presents thorny problems for the translator who is confronted with dialect, local customs, technical terminology, and the local offices and regulations governing maintenance of dikes. The work was not rendered into English until the eve of the First World War, when it appeared in two ill-timed projects: Kuno Francke’s The German Classics of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in 1913–14, which paraded German literary achievement, attempting to counter popular American conceptions of German life and culture, and a 1917 anthology of canonical nineteenth-century German writers—Storm, Goethe, Fontane, and Keller—titled simply German Fiction. In 1917 American women sending their sons and grandsons off to war to whip the Kaiser therefore more likely knew Werner’s Germany as the setting of individualist happiness than Storm’s Germany as the locus of tragedy.
Like Werner’s *Banned and Blessed* and unlike now-canonical works of realism, the “German domestic love-story” with its strong family resemblances once so “agreeable and familiar” to American readers avoids tragedy, uniting duty with the attainment of the object of desire. It erects ostensibly insurmountable barriers and then determinedly removes them to emplot union.

**Reading for the Happy Ending:**

**Realism, Contingency, and Myth**

The virtually guaranteed happy ending of these German novels by women powerfully encouraged nineteenth-century American consumption of them. While it may be tempting to condescend to American liking for these imported happy endings, there are good reasons not to do so. Reading pleasure can signify deep human need rooted in specific historical conditions. Yet while literary criticism has validated aesthetic pleasure with respect to high comedy with its happy endings, it has often dismissed the pleasures of reading popular fiction, particularly romance novels, on political grounds. Romance allegedly provides a reductive view of the human condition, promotes false consciousness, and elides the contingency that shapes reality. As Alison Light observes, the discussion of romance has been criticized from the Left as a form of oppression under capitalism; in this line of thinking romance “is a form of oppressive ideology, which works to keep women in their socially and sexually subordinate place.” Light maintains that discussions of romance ought instead to consider that “literature is a source of pleasure, passion, and entertainment” and that pleasure must not be seen as “explain[ing] away politics” (372).

In Light’s view, romance grants women “uncomplicated access to a subjectivity which is unified and coherent and still operating within the field of pleasure” (391). The need for such access as indicated by the repeated reading of romance can be seen as symptomatic of the difficulty of fulfilling the demands and promises of femininity in real life. Advocating a more complex and less judgmental understanding of the consumption of popular literature, Light models an approach to studying it that recognizes active seeking on the part of readers and that suggests, furthermore, that reading for happy endings, while likely not politically progressive, can have transgressive effects in the context of readers’ realities, that is, realities that withhold what the novels deliver (392).

In her work on the romance novel from the 1980s, Radway, somewhat in the leftist vein that Light means to supersede, points out the false con-
sciousness that, she believes, the structures of romance produce. Romance, she asserts, leaves male authority intact and reintegrates women into patriarchal society (RR 217). Thus romantic fiction may deflect and circumscribe “real protest . . . by supplying vicariously certain needs that, if presented as demands in the real world, might otherwise lead to the re-ordering of heterosexual relationships” (RR 217). At the same time she insists, as does Light, that we should not assume that “commodified objects exert such pressure and influence on their consumers that [consumers] have no power as individuals to resist or alter the ways in which those objects mean or can be used” (RR 221). Radway emphasizes, moreover, that we should not assume that these objects “bear all of their significances on the surface” (RR 221). Both Light and Radway thus underscore the value of the closer and more careful reading of these novels undertaken in this chapter and support the hypothesis that nineteenth-century Americans consumed German happy endings for reasons that are not trivial per se.

Radway also importantly identifies the proximity of romance novels to realism and thus the possibility that the fantasy of romance bears upon readers’ reality. While readers do not expect the world of the romance novel to be theirs, they nevertheless understand it to inform and instruct them about a “real” world, indicating that “they also believe that the universe of the romantic fantasy is somehow congruent, if not continuous, with the one they inhabit” (RR 186). Romance readers, Radway argues, cleave to the fiction that romance works like history. They pretend that they do not know that events are lining up to produce an inevitable happy ending, even if they would not have read the book in the first place had they not been assured of that conclusion. Radway points out that romance appears to offer the mimetic fiction of novels: each time one begins reading, one accompanies new characters on a new journey “whose final destination is unknown at the moment of embarkation. Thus the act of reading a romance that is constructed like a novel is fraught with the excitement of open-ended potential and simultaneously marked by the threat of the unknown” (RR 199). Romance writers thereby “supply a myth in the guise of the truly possible” (RR 207).

“Myth in the guise of the truly possible” aptly describes most of the German novels by women that emigrated from Germany to America to deliver a happy ending. While some of these plots are improbable, they are not impossible, especially not under the terms that the narratives establish to begin with.\(^75\) Moreover, they take place in a pleasantly congruent but foreign Germany; American realism need not apply. Nineteenth-century readers could consider—at least while under the spell of reading—that what was
clearly impossible in America as they daily lived it just might not be in far-off Germany.

Dozens of German novels in English translation ritually made visible a myth of community founded in virtue and sentiment and anchored in marriage. They offered Americans variations of scenarios in which it was possible to make mistakes, take risks, express emotion without embarrassment, experience a degree of freedom, and still reach a safe port in a marriage characterized by mutual obligation and desire, one in which women retained and exerted influence. The books thereby invited American readers to imagine Germany as a place where some of their fondest hopes for the enduring power of feminine virtue and domestic sentiment could be blissfully realized—if arbitrarily and temporarily—even as the fictive heroes and heroines mapped out scenarios of action that expanded the boundaries of home.

In 1900 “Miss Nellie Rank” presented Nataly von Eschstruth’s *The Erl Queen* to “Miss Ethel Roby.” Ethel, it appears, carried the book with her into her married life, carefully placing a book plate in it and signing herself “Mrs. Percy H. Bell.” As Peterson’s Magazine noted in 1892, the book made “an acceptable birthday gift,” and as Rothschild and Company advertised in the Chicago Tribune in 1895, it made a good Christmas present. Five years later, Nellie must have thought so, too.

*The Erl Queen* opens with a fairy tale in which a prince searches for the meaning of love. Reality replicates the fairy tale when Norbert de Sengouleme meets the young Ruth von Altingen and falls in love with her only to be disappointed when she rejects his marriage proposal. After many misunderstandings, however, the couple marries and has a son. Thus in the late nineteenth century the book provided American readers with yet another version of the happy conclusion of the German domestic romances that in the preceding decades had become standard reading. Upon the appearance of the translation in 1892, The Critic pointed out that “like most German novels, this one is full of fancy and sentiment.”

This novel itself disingenuously illustrates the immaturity of a minor character, Ännchen, through her liking for novels that end well: she looks “at the last page first, and if nothing is said of an engagement or a wedding, [she throws] the book aside” (79). Even if *The Erl Queen*, with its allusion to Goethe’s famous ballad “Der Erlkönig,” laid claim to a more profound treatment of love than that in the novels Ännchen prefers, this novel would have pleased her, and the author surely knew it. Beginning at least as early as 1895, *The Erl Queen* was marketed in America, alongside novels by Heim-
burg, explicitly to girls, suggesting that American publishers and booksellers recognized that many of this latter-day generation of German novels did not have the power of their predecessors from the previous three decades to fascinate adults. Yet, as Nellie's gift to Ethel testifies, American reading of German happy endings continued into the new century and into many an American marriage.