

Lecture by Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly (Fellow, German Literature)

This lecture was originally given at the launch of the College's Seven Hundredth Anniversary Campaign on 26 September 2009. It was delivered with the accompanying PowerPoint presentation, of which the corresponding slides are indicated in the text.

Title Slide: Beauty or Beast? The Woman Warrior in the German Imagination from the Renaissance to the Present

Slide 1 This talk is a short introduction to some of the ideas that are central to the book whose cover you see here which Oxford University Press will bring out in May 2010.

How I came to work on this subject - even to realise that it was a subject - was that I was asked about 10 years ago to give a lecture about real women who masqueraded as men and who took part in the Thirty Years' War and in other wars in early modern Europe. It proved very easy to find information about historical women who participated in war in English, French, Dutch, and Spanish-speaking territories from the sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries. The women in question were in some cases **slide 2** ordinary soldiers who masqueraded as men and took part in actual combat and in other cases they were members of what one might call the **slide 3** 'officer class'—aristocratic women who 'held the fort' in their husbands' absence, who commanded troops, or directed sieges. I was also able quite easily to find testimonies by women themselves in these languages about their involvement in war – Catalina de Erauso, the woman depicted in the second slide, is a good example again.

But finding records of German-speaking women warriors before the Napoleonic Wars proved very difficult indeed. What I found instead was a huge number of **slide 4** artistic representations of women warriors in every century from the Renaissance to the present - on the stage, in the opera house, on the page, and in paintings and prints. It is these imaginings about warrior women that are the subject of my book. In some cases they are depictions of historical figures—Joan of Arc (1412–31) or Charlotte Corday (1768—but in most cases they are re-imaginings of women warriors to be found in mythology, ancient and medieval history, and **slide 5** the Bible. These ancient sources of western culture tell stories about the woman warrior because she is, by definition, a transgressive and therefore frightening figure. Just as these sources tell stories about other terrifying visions—the son sleeping with

his mother, the father sacrificing his own child, the mother killing her children—so they tell them about the woman who leaves her proper female sphere, takes up a weapon, goes to war and, in some cases, even kills. She may be doing this from the best of motives, she may be mandated by God, the gods, or her own people, but the idea of a woman with the potential to kill causes deep unease.

To whom does it cause unease? The answer is: to men. The representations of the woman warrior that I'm looking at are of women by men and so, by and large, they convey male desires and male fears. Male fear of a woman who is as strong as a man, who cannot be tamed because she is holding a weapon, who has the power to kill and who perhaps has already killed is very deep-seated. At the same time, she is deeply fascinating – provided you, the man, can tame her. **Slide 6** The late nineteenth century transmutes the woman warrior into the *femme fatale*. In contrast to the warrior, whose potential for violence is open and official, the *femme fatale* is a seductress whose malevolent potential for violence is hidden, making her a figure full of perverse and sadistic desire and fascination. This basic conflict informs all portrayals of the woman warrior by men—the conflict between woman as embodiment of beauty and as object of desire, and woman as beastly, the personification of temptation, of duplicity, and of crazed violence, the object of fear and loathing. This is why I've called the book 'Beauty or Beast'.

You might object that all western cultures re-imagine the women warriors to be found in classical mythology and the Bible, so why focus on the German-speaking world? Because, so I contend, the figure of the woman warrior has a continuous prominence and importance in German that it does not have in any other western culture. The woman with the sword, whether as Amazon, Judith, Valkyrie, or heroic maiden, plays a central role in German cultural consciousness from at least the fifteenth century up to the first half of the twentieth century, and it would be possible to show that many of those imaginings are just as numerous in the Middle Ages. Not only are depictions of the woman warrior extremely prevalent, but many of them are officially venerated canonical monuments of German culture: paintings of **slide 7** Judith by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1530) and **slide 8** Gustav Klimt (1901 and 1909), **Slide 9** Friedrich Schiller's Maid of Orleans (1801), **slide 10** Heinrich von Kleist's Amazon Penthesilea (1808), Friedrich Hebbel's Judith (1840), **slide 11** Richard Wagner's operatic treatment of the Valkyrie Brünnhilde (1856).

At the same time as nineteenth-century theatres were staging the woman warrior in a seemingly inexhaustible stream of dramatic works, the great capital cities of the German-speaking territories were doing the same in their public spaces. **Slide 12** In 1838, for instance, August Kiss's striking statue of the *Fighting Amazon* was erected in the centre of Berlin outside the Altes Museum Kiss's Amazon is on horseback, half-naked, exuding physical energy, with her spear poised to kill a lion which has launched itself at her horse. **Slide 13** The Palace Bridge a little further along has 8 sculptural groups in which either Nike, the goddess of victory, or Athene, the goddess of war, accompany and teach the young warrior. **Slide 14** The Berlin skyline is dominated by the golden Winged Victory on the Siegestsäule (triumphal column) inaugurated in 1873. The figure is wearing a helmet and holding not only a laurel wreath but also a staff with the Iron Cross prominent on its tip. This development goes hand in hand with the increasing militarization of Prussia. **Slide 14** We could say something similar about Vienna, dominated by Pallas Athene, the goddess of war, as well as of wisdom.

You could say that these classical images are so standard in European cities at this period that they say very little about German culture specifically. The evolution of the figure of Germania, the personification of the German nation, is another matter altogether. We can trace the iconographic development of the figure from the captive Germania represented as an Amazon on Roman coins. It was the emperor Maximilian I (1459–1519), an arch-publicist and mythmaker, who invented Germania 'as the mother of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation'. From the middle of the 19th century on, Germania put on armour and turned more and more into a symbol of the nation defending itself against the French aggressor on the other side of the Rhine. Her sword—originally an emblem of justice and of temporal authority—became not just a defensive but an offensive weapon. **Slide 16** In Christian Köhler's painting *Germania erwacht* ('Germania Awakes', 1849), Germania is shown just reaching warily for her sword, while **slide 17** Lorenz Clasen's painting *Germania auf der Wacht am Rhein* ('Germania on Guard at the Rhine', 1860) depicts her in a watchful stance, high above the river on a rock, holding an enormous sword and shield, preparing to repel the French invaders. **Slide 18** Hermann Wislicenus's painting of the same scene in 1873 shows a more masculine Germania, now clothed in full armour, but it is **Slide 19** Friedrich August Kaulbach's painting *Deutschland August 1914*

(‘Germany, August 1914’) that depicts Germania as a Fury, in a depiction based on Schiller’s Maid of Orleans in the second act of his play *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*.

After World War II the number of representations of women warriors decreases, but it should not be forgotten that, even if there are fewer new imaginings about the woman warrior, the older works that depict her are by now canonical works taught in schools and universities, performed and viewed frequently, reproduced—for instance, in the case of Cranach and Klimt’s paintings of Judith—on everything from ashtrays to posters, while the mass media now make the old imaginings available to a new audience. To cite only three examples: **slide 20** there were eleven separate productions of Schiller’s *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* in German theatres during the winter of 2004-2005; Wagner’s Brünnhilde regularly strides across the stage of German opera houses, not just that of Bayreuth; and **slide 21** in 2004 a two-part dramatization of the *Nibelungenlied* on German television, directed by Uli Edel with Kristanna Løken playing Brünhild, represented this quintessential German warrior woman to a new mass audience. To this day, the figure of Judith is often used as a way of thinking of the woman terrorist, for example, Ulrike Meinhof.

It is important, however, not to equate woman warrior with woman killer. There are plenty of depictions of women killers in German literature. The woman who kills her own children is a favourite German subject in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries— **slide 22** Gretchen in Goethe’s *Faust* (1788, 1808) is the most famous infanticide, but there are many others. **Slide 23** There are also works that imagine the dagger-drawing murderer, **slide 24** for instance. There are yet other works that represent the *femme fatale*, who by her very existence, but in particular through her sexual magnetism, impels men towards their own death and destruction. Some of you may know Alban Berg’s opera *Lulu* (begun in 1929 and unfinished at Berg’s death in 1935), based on plays by Wedekind.

Slide 25 The woman warrior is a different character. She does not set out to kill of her own accord nor does she ask others to do her killing for her, but, like any warrior in any age, bears arms on behalf of a cause, a city, or a country. **Slide 26** The warrior steps out boldly and publicly, holding her weapon, for she is authorized to bear arms by some higher male authority, whether this is God, a religious leader, the king, her father, her brother, or her—usually absent—husband. But the point is this: The woman warrior may be fighting for a good cause and even be mandated by God Himself, but she is still inherently dangerous, and this danger goes beyond what one

might call the 'normal' danger thought, since the Old Testament and Classical times, to be inherent in all women as forces of chaos and instability. The woman warrior leaves her proper sphere of hearth and home, kitchen and nursery, and invades the male sphere of the battlefield and the camp. Instead of giving life, nurturing, and healing—all functions associated with motherhood, which is considered to be woman's primary function—she takes up arms in order to kill, defeat, humiliate, and maim. Since the woman warrior does not go to war against other women but against men, the people she is going to kill, defeat, humiliate, and maim are men. By taking up arms, she is no longer automatically physically weaker than a man and so cannot easily be brought to heel by being made to fear physical or sexual violence. The woman warrior is thus a transgressive figure who has to be tamed. This taming is to be carried out either by sexual means – by rape or defloration - , by death, or both.

Slide 27 Sexual taming and defloration are built into the myths about the Amazons, for instance, in the story of Theseus' capture and rape of the Amazon Antiope and in the tale of the ninth labour of Heracles, in which Heracles has to capture the girdle of the Amazon queen Hippolyta. **Slide 28** Germanic and Nordic myth also tells how the warrior woman Brünhild is deflowered and thereby made submissive. But this does not mean that the woman who has been tamed in this way can be allowed to live. An ordinary woman who is merely rebellious can, if brought to heel, be allowed to live on as an obedient wife and mother. Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1590–4) is a perfect demonstration of this. The so-called shrew Katherine rebels against the marriage she is forced into by her father, so she has to be beaten, starved, and humiliated by her husband in order to be turned into his perfect—because submissive—wife. **Slide 29** But this solution will not work in the case of the warrior woman. First of all, she may simply be too strong to tame in this way. But more important: what man wants a woman in his bed who has the potential to kill him while he sleeps, as Judith in the Bible does with Holofernes, and who, perhaps, already has blood on her hands? So women warriors by and large cannot be given the option of becoming wives—they have to die. This can happen on the battlefield but much more often the solution adopted is to have the woman carry out the killing herself, which is at once both a particularly exquisite punishment and a neat way to restore order. The range of means by which they kill themselves is considerable: they are sent poison to drink, they choke themselves on their bonds, they descend into the grave by a sheer act of will; they jump into the river. Brünhild, in the plethora of

works about her in the 19th century, dies in a greatest variety of ways, according to whether the authors concerned use the *Nibelungenlied* or the Nordic epics as their source or whether they come up with a wholly different solution. She variously stabs herself, jumps into the Rhine, or leaps into the flames.

Another point to note is that, when a woman puts on trousers and masquerades as a man, she is doubly dangerous. How can a man guard against her, if he can't even see that she is this unnerving thing, a woman? So it is very important that the woman warrior remain visible as a woman either by wearing a skirt or by revealing her female body at an opportune moment. Though it was well known to the historian Schiller that Joan of Arc was a determined cross-dresser, he specifies a breastplate and skirt as her costume in his stage directions. **Slide 30** Wagner specifies full armour for his Valkyrie Brünnhilde in his stage directions, yet in the first performance of the *Ring* cycle in 1876 in Bayreuth she wore a skirt, a breastplate, and a helmet, the costume that is still traditional today. So long as the warrior remains visible as a woman, thereby indicating that her assumption of this role is limited in time and/or has only come about because of some exceptional circumstance, she can appear in public in the capacity of a warrior and can be allowed to die a noble death, as Schiller's Joan and Wagner's Brünnhilde do. If she actually masquerades as a man and wears trousers, this makes her a much more ambivalent and dangerous figure.

Sometimes the woman warrior is not fighting on behalf of society in general or a universal cause, but on behalf of other women. **Slide 31** This is the case with the Amazons. They are imagined in the Greek tradition as founding their own state because they were attacked by men in the first place, and then of defending that state themselves with their own army. From there, the Amazons begin to conquer other territories and build cities. **Slide 32** Amazons are warriors by their very nature and therefore unnatural women. They are said to mutilate their own bodies, burn off their right nipples so as to be able to hold a bow, solving the problem of how to sustain a society without men by capturing them by warlike means, sleeping with them so as to become pregnant, and then killing them. The Amazons are unnatural mothers too, killing or maiming any sons they produce and turning their daughters into warriors in their own image. The whole point about these women is that they represent a society that has to be vanquished before the proper patriarchal order can be instituted.

Slide 33 There is, however, one woman warrior of ancient provenance who does not fit into the patterns just described. This woman kills the general of the

foreign army who is threatening her people, helps to raise a siege and bring about a signal victory against vastly superior odds, and yet she does not die. This woman is the Old Testament figure of Judith. She bravely leaves the besieged city of Bethulia when the men are too cowardly to do so, uses her beauty to ensnare the enemy general Holofernes, and then decapitates him, bringing his head back as a trophy. She lives on to a ripe old age, a chaste widow. This story already exercised great fascination in the Middle Ages, but takes on new life with the Reformation. From that point up to today Judith is constantly present to the German imagination, presenting the problem of what to do with a female member of society who has killed a man. **Slide 34** Now, from the 16th to the 18th century, Judith was thought of, as you see here, as God's instrument, the idea being that, in a crisis, God can and will use even such a weak instrument as a woman to carry out his plan and save his chosen people. But how did Holofernes fall into such a deep sleep that he never noticed Judith taking his sword off the bed post? What happened between them in the tent? The playwrights just jump over this part. Holofernes simply falls asleep, having drunk too much. But you might argue, and I do, that the artist here is hinting at a sexual connection between Judith and Holofernes in the way she is looking down at him and in the way his beard is touching her naked thigh. I could show you many other examples.

Slide 35 The 19th century was, however, convinced that the pair had had sex before she kills him. Horace Vernet painted Judith for the Paris Salon getting up from the bed in which he imagines her to have been deflowered—another favourite fantasy of the nineteenth century being that this widow has remained a virgin. Heinrich Heine, who saw the picture in Paris, was very excited by it. He describes Judith, as she gets up from the bed, as being 'on the borderline of virginity which she has just crossed, all divine purity and yet soiled by the world, like a desecrated host', and Hebbel, in his play of 1840 **slide 36** as well as all writers from then on, was convinced that Judith had sex with Holofernes—indeed that he raped her—that she probably in her heart of hearts desired him to do this, and that she castrated him in revenge. In Hebbel's version, Holofernes has probably impregnated her as well. If she does turn out to be pregnant, then the High Priests will execute her at her own request. So Hebbel's Judith too has, in all likelihood, organized her own death.

We've been talking up to now about re-imaginings of mythical and biblical women warriors, and warriors from the distant historical past, who can be cut to a particular size as needed, since their resemblance to actual women is tenuous. But

there is also a body of material that deals with real German historical women from the recent past of those who depict them. A prominent group here consists of the so-called heroic maidens ('Heldenmädchen'), real women who took part in the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon around 1813. **slide 37** The most famous of these women is Eleonore Prochaska. She left home without telling her father, still less asking for his permission, bought a uniform, and joined Lützow's Volunteers. **Slide 38** She was shot while drumming to rally the troops of her own side, saying, according to legend, as she expired: 'Lieutenant, I am a maiden.' There are umpteen works about her during the 19th and early 20th century. Beethoven wrote incidental music to the first of these plays, for instance. The lengths to which writers and playwrights were prepared to go to justify her actions, and by justifying to undermine them, is striking. Their most important strategy was to show her to be mandated—tacitly, of course—by her own father and to portray her in some sense as his puppet. She could not simply be an independent woman who wanted to fight for her country just like a man, because women were not thought capable of any such decision, still less of any such action.

Slide 39 And finally, we come to Freud. Freud was convinced that women are castrated beings who realize as young girls that they lack a penis and then spend the rest of their lives longing for this organ. They can only achieve wholeness with the help of a being who has a penis, namely, a man, and only then when this being is kind enough to give them a child. Where can Freud have acquired this extraordinary idea? He reveals the source of his knowledge in his famous lecture 'Die Weiblichkeit' ('Femininity'). He ends it by telling his listeners how to learn more about women: 'Wollen Sie mehr über die Weiblichkeit wissen, so befragen Sie Ihre eigenen Lebenserfahrungen, oder Sie wenden sich an die Dichter' ('If you want to know more about femininity, then question your own experiences in life or else turn to the poets'). He does not say, *nota bene*, 'if you want to know more about femininity, then question a woman'. Freud was interested in literature and, like any German-speaking intellectual of his day, was acquainted with a wide sweep of the German texts we have been discussing. Schiller, whose Joan of Arc, is the model for many 19th century portrayals, was Freud's favourite German author. Schiller, like Kleist and Hebbel, did indeed think that women were inferior beings, that they should tend the hearth and stay in the nursery and not enter into the public sphere, that they could never rise to genius and were not capable of running their own affairs. In the early modern period, with its one-sex model of the human being, it was perfectly possible for women to

execute exceptional deeds of physical bravery and emotional toughness, and so rise up the sliding scale closer to the perfection of the man. These viragos—*Männinnen* ('she-men'), as they were called—are exceptions to the rule of female inferiority. From the 18th century on, this is impossible. Women are of their nature different, weaker, passive, receptive not creative, irrational, emotional, etc. In other words, just as Freud believed, they are beings who lack something. They sometimes enter the male sphere and take up the sword – becoming thereby phallic women, but of course then they have to die.

Slide 40 Freud significantly uses Hebbel's play *Judith* as an example in his essay on 'Das Tabu der Virginität' ('The Taboo of Virginity', 1918). Hebbel's compelling drama is the first extensive treatment in German of the theme of the virginal widow whose husband was impotent on their wedding night. She is therefore incomplete and is longing to be deflowered. She meets the real man Holofernes – real because he is brutal - and both abhors and desires him. This is the idea that woman want to be raped. When he does so, she takes up the sword and uses it against Holofernes. Momentarily, she is complete. When she lays down the sword, Hebbel's Judith is more than probably pregnant, that is, Holofernes has given her a child as a penis/sword substitute. When you read Freud in his place in the chronology of German literature, art, and thought, at the end of the long line of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women in literature and art who are made whole and complete beings for a brief span by taking up the sword and becoming phallic women, you cannot avoid the conclusion that he did indeed get many of his ideas about women from literature.

Did women not write about these subjects at all? In setting out the ground-rules for depictions of the woman warrior I've deliberately only used as examples works by male authors, for it is they who over two millennia designed and maintained those ground-rules. Women themselves only begin to have their say from the second half of the eighteenth century, which is when, unlike England or France where it happens much earlier, they begin to produce secular literature in German in quantity. They do not at this early date engage with male imaginings about Amazons, Joan of Arc or Judith, but instead invent fictional women who take part in wars in the real world, imagining a space for themselves in which they can think the unthinkable, even if they sometimes feel impelled ultimately to reinforce patriarchal norms. They use the relatively new form of the novel to imagine women putting on trousers and

taking part in war and revolution, acting in a way that society would never allow a virtuous woman to act in real life. **Slide 41** It is only when women have achieved some measure of emancipation at the end of the nineteenth century that they begin to examine such figures as Judith and the Amazons for themselves, move beyond the beauty-or-beast dichotomy, and wring some emancipatory potential out of a figure **slide 42** such as the Amazon.