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Book Review

*The Virginal Mother in German Culture: From Sophie von La Roche and Goethe to Metropolis*

by Lauren Nossett, Northwestern University Press, 2019. 234 pp. \$34.95

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***The Virginal Mother in German Culture: From Sophie von La Roche and Goethe to Metropolis***

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Lauren Nossett explores the obsession with women's virginity and the idealization of the maternal caregiving mother figure in German literature, film and culture across the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. There is a considerable amount of literature on the depiction of the mother and motherhood that have been examined through the lens of time, status, gender norms, etc. in both German studies as well as in Gender and Women's studies. Nossett specifically investigates the representations of the ideal virginal mother versus the disparaged biological mothers by analyzing literary instances of the virginal mother during crucial time periods that depict changes in German identity and society.

The book is split into five chapters and includes an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter provides background information on the author and time period of the primary works being examined, which lays the foundation for the main arguments. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the idealistic virginal mother in Sophie von La Roche's *Die Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*. Nossett positions Sophie as the feminine model of the chaste maternal figure, caregiver, and heroine. This heroic depiction places Sophie, and subsequently other female gendered characters like her, above other women. Nossett draws on several vital points related to virginal mothers in this chapter that carry on throughout the rest of her analyses throughout the book, one point being that the existence of virginal mothers is due to either the lack of "good" mothers (24) or the presence of "bad" mothers (24). These "good" and "bad" mothers in this case are the biological mothers who are not

caregiving, virginal, or self-sacrificing. Another vital point from this chapter is the victory of the virtuous. The virginal woman or girl does not succumb to the advances of the seducer. Even death is preferable to the loss of female virtue.

Chapter 2 explores the representations of virginal and “bad” mothers in Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, and *Faust I*. Nossett’s analysis compares the three works and continues to support her arguments about ideal virginal non-biological mother. The characters of Lotte (*Werther*) and Natalie (*Wilhelm*) are, like Sophie, the ideal “good” virtuous mother figures that are lusted after by men. Gretchen (*Faust*) however, is the “bad” mother figure. Nossett points out that it is Gretchen’s naivete that leads to her demise by allowing herself to be seduced, which leads to her becoming pregnant, and murdering her infant child. The chapter’s conclusion notes the distinction between female authors and Goethe’s representations of the virtuous mother. Female authors depict these characters as heroines and non-threatening to the patriarchy, whereas in the works by Goethe, the male characters struggle in separating ideal female from the female bod

Chapter 3 analyzes E. Marlitt’s *Das Geheimnis der alten Mamsell* and *Die zweite Frau*. Marlitt’s female characters do not threaten the patriarchy and there is a focus on woman within the nuclear family as being self-sacrificing, nurturing, and caregiving. There is also less emphasis on romance and the demise of female characters is not due to seduction or to a loss of virtue.

Chapter 4 navigates the themes of motherhood and caregiving in the autobiographies of Hedwig Dohm, Adelheid Popp, and Ottilie Baader. The virtuous caregiving mother in literary works is a far cry from the individual experiences that the three autobiographers demonstrate. These works sum up the unrealistic expectations that were placed upon women to be feminine, maternal, and care-giving, the struggle and expectation to contribute to the household income, and the managing of a household, which included taking care of children,

elderly, and sick family members.

Chapter 5 ties in film by exploring the virginal mother and the vamp anti-mother in Thea von Harbou and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. In *Metropolis*, the virtuous Maria is the caregiving mother figure that looks after the factory worker's children and is the object of Freder's desire. The robot that Maria is transformed into is shaped by men which creates a fear in German society. With this metamorphosis from chaste to vamp, Nossett demonstrates the need for the virginal mother in order to maintain a stable society.

In Nossett's conclusion there is a glimpse into the shift from the importance placed on heroic virginal maternal caregivers to the biological mother in the Third Reich. During the Third Reich there was a demand for increased birthrates and the notion of chastity was practically nonexistent. This shifting idea of the biological mother being the ideal continued into the rest of the twentieth century.

*The Virginal Mother in German culture* is a comprehensive analysis that sheds new light on previous scholarship on the representation of motherhood in German culture. The book is well organized and easy to read in the sense that scholars do not have to have extensive background knowledge or have read the primary literature in order to understand the main arguments and examples Nossett explores. Nossett's work demonstrates the relevance of depictions of virginal mothers in German film, literary, cultural, and societal history.