

# **Gender and Violence in a Fairy-tale World: Romanticism in Kerstin Hensel's *Lärchenau***

Melissa Sheedy  
University of Wisconsin, Madison

## **Introduction**

With her 2008 novel *Lärchenau*, Kerstin Hensel constructs a fantasy world in which princesses, kings, and wizards coexist, and this world is troubled by a strong pattern of violence that recalls the Romantic movement of the early nineteenth century, especially the traditional German fairytale or *Märchen*. As in her previous works,<sup>1</sup> Hensel introduces the fairytale as a central, underlying structure in the text, fortified by Romantic themes and extremely violent overtones. Hensel's narrative about a housewife who envisions herself as a lost princess deconstructs the fairy-tale formula and imagines a version of Romanticism that combines themes of violence and the fantastic along with the fairy-tale elements of the novel.

Within this twenty-first century version of a markedly violent Romanticism, gender plays a crucial role. In the novel, brutality and hostility occur overwhelmingly within the circle of the family: in the relationships between siblings, parents and children, and husbands and wives. In this prison-like realm that provokes a male-dominated duality of power, the victims are almost exclusively female. This pattern of violence against women that plays out within the private sphere of the family does not stay behind closed doors, but instead is indicative of larger social issues. As the private becomes the political, these scenes of abuse in which the aggressor degrades, or in this context, *feminizes* the victim, reflect on a society dominated by a patriarchal order based on binary power structures.

Following a brief summary of the novel as it pertains to this article, I investigate the ways in which the author employs violence along with other features characteristic of *Märchen*, including structural similarities, constructs of mythology and escape, and elements of the supernatural, such as monsters, heroes, and the (almost exclusively female) body as a target of brutality. In this article, I look at the ways in which Hensel draws on Romantic traditions in order to work through issues she sees in contemporary society and demonstrate that her focus on aspects of the body, gender, and the family circle not only augments the historical conception of Romanticism as it appears in the novel, but also enhances our understanding of the ways in which these themes relate to the violence inherent in Romantic works. Through focalized female perspectives and a portrayal of female history, the author connects aggression against women in the realm of the family to larger contemporary social issues, and by means of her ironic and often sarcastic deconstruction of Romanticism, she uncovers structures of violence in the home.

Hensel's novel centers around the small town of Lärchenau, set in a quiet wooded area outside of Berlin in the years during and after the Second World War, and it concentrates primarily on the story of Gunter and Adele Konarske. Gunter's unwed mother Rosie had suffered for years under her father's abuse. Even after his death, the traumas of her past are manifested in the continued violence she inflicts on herself, sometimes within sight of her son. After Gunter's marriage, Rosie eventually commits suicide. Gunter's father, the legendary Dr. Rochus Lingott, is arrested and killed by the Nazis before he has the chance to meet his son. Gunter spends most of his childhood in the doctor's office formerly occupied by Lingott, where his mother Rosie works, and there he develops a fascination with the shiny surgical instruments.

Gunter's future wife Adele grows up under the mistaken belief that her father is Adolf Hitler, and this myth of higher conception forever colors her worldview. After her mother's death, she spends time in an orphanage in East Berlin and eventually moves to Lärchenau, where she meets and later marries Gunter. Both fatherless children find solace in the mythology each has built around an absent father figure. Gunter, like his father, becomes a successful physician, but his desire to achieve Dr. Lingott's legendary status results in increasingly desperate attempts to advance in the medical community. Adele stays at home with their son and slowly succumbs to the stifling environment under Gunter's authoritarian control. The life they share seems ideal from the outside, but their marriage is a façade that barely conceals a realm marked by violence and abuse. As Adele enters her fifties, she becomes the human subject of one of Gunter's medical experiments, which causes her to age backwards miraculously. As she grows steadily younger as a result of this "Verjüngungswunder (rejuvenation miracle)" (Hensel 437), she also begins to retreat further and further into her imagined fairy-tale world.

### ***Lärchenau* and Romanticism**

German Romanticism, like any literary movement, resists concrete definition, and it is important to recognize that the term does not indicate a unified, homogeneous movement. For the purposes of this article, Romanticism can perhaps best be understood as a series of loosely linked tendencies, themes and philosophies that originated at the end of the eighteenth century and continued for several decades. Literature of the Romantic tradition comprises an extremely diverse corpus of works, including novels and poems by Novalis and Clemens Brentano, short stories and novellas by E.T.A. Hoffmann, Ludwig Tieck's *Kunstmärchen*, epistolary novels by Bettina von Arnim, and fairytales, such as those collected by the Brothers Grimm. The scope and diversity of works that are linked to the movement are indicative of a general tendency among the Romantics to bring together various disciplines and genres such as science, art, philosophy, and poetry (Nassar 1). While the term Romanticism encompasses a broad and varied set of aesthetics, theories, and characteristics, I focus here on strands of late German Romanticism that are often marked by themes of insanity, intense emotion, and that reflect the Romantic yearning for an ideal, mythologized world (Schmidt 22-23).<sup>2</sup> The fascination of many of these authors with the darker side of reality corresponds to a preoccupation with the topic of violence, which appears in many Romantic works, including fairytales (Pizer 51). The idea of brutality in Romanticism can be seen as a force in opposition to the longing for this ideal, immaterial, and unachievable world. Violence serves as a hard and often brutal reminder that the world sought by many Romantic figures does not, as yet, exist.

Hensel's *Lärchenau* shares numerous characteristics with works of the Romantic period, the most fundamental of which lies in its structure, which resembles and at the same time deconstructs features of the movement. The underlying fairytale that Adele invents for herself to fulfill her mother's fancy of her "higher birth" is a fantasy world that exists only in her head, but the fairytale nevertheless serves as a basis for the novel's plot. The act of constructing a new world around her mirrors the Romantic desire to create a new mythology and, in so doing, Adele is able to flee reality. In her fairytale, Adele plays the lead role, that of the princess. On her first day of school, when she appears with a crown on her head, her dream to "finally be a real princess" surfaces (Hensel 87).<sup>3</sup> After Adele comes to Lärchenau from the Berlin orphanage, the girl views the tiny village as her new kingdom, ready for its monarch. Later, after she marries Gunter, he calls her his "Mauseprinzeßchen," or "Little Mouse Princess," a name that implicates a quiet and passive role for her in their marriage and foreshadows her future as a guinea pig for Gunter's experiments. The nickname also signifies and mocks the royal place that Adele has always imagined for herself, indicating Hensel's strategy of building and deconstructing Romantic ideals of female characters to reveal how they seemingly elevate women, yet really serve to imprison them.

Adele's fairy-tale world is one filled with kings, magicians, and heroes, and she spends most of her youth under the mistaken belief that her father is Adolf Hitler, who she imagines to be the "king" of Germany. For her mother, the lie is convenient and believable, and by presenting Adele as the daughter of the Führer, she capitalizes on feelings of post-war defeat and disappointment and is more easily able to find work and lodging in Berlin. Adele never learns the truth about her father, and thus she never shakes off the fantastic myth of her conception. After the war, the girl becomes convinced that her father is Wilhelm Pieck, the first president of the GDR, when her teacher makes the claim that he is everyone's father. In Adele's delusion, her father is no less than a king, and her conception of the man is not tied to a specific person and instead serves as an indication of a higher birth. Her childlike certainty regarding her royal heritage leads to the expectation and hope that her father will someday appear and take her away from the life she has known:

When Adele sat with her mother at the dinner table after a drudgingly spent day at school, she was allowed to wear her crown. All of her weariness then fell away, and the hope, that today or tomorrow a man in a crimson robe would appear before her and say – 'I am your father – let us ride to my castle!' – overcame her.<sup>4</sup> (Hensel 92-93)

This certainty that her kingly father would appear and grant her the royal life she deserves remains with Adele throughout her marriage. Even as the harsher realities of her relationship with Gunter become apparent, her sense of hope and expectation continues to color her own interpretation of her life and her role in it.

Similarly, Gunter also entertains a false impression of his father, whom he never knew. After listening to the fantastic stories that the people in the village tell him about their beloved doctor, Gunter believes that the man must have been a wizard. This vision of otherworldly greatness encourages him as a boy and as a young man to try to outdo the legendary physician. Both absent fathers in the story are seen as heroes in the eyes of their children, while the fathers

who are present—Gunter, who has a son, and Rosie’s father—are inattentive parents at best and at worst, violent and abusive. Gunter’s and Adele’s desire for the unknown—in this case, their absent fathers—plays directly into the Romantic longing for an ideal world that does not exist. The imagined stories that they both construct around their “mighty” fathers indicate a deep yearning for a new truth to their lives, a mythology that is in fact mirrored in the newly conceived GDR and the ideology surrounding its conception of the new world.

Structurally, *Lärchenau* distinguishes itself through its fairytale-like use of language. Hensel utilizes poetic conventions such as repetition throughout the text, which one sees for instance in a recurring construction consisting of three semantically or thematically related words that she uses to express a certain feeling or atmosphere strongly. Some examples are “fear anger arrogance (Angst Zorn Übermut)” (Hensel 116), or “frills pompoms sequins (Rüschen Bommeln Pailletten)” (Hensel 292). This construction, which always appears without punctuation, occurs frequently in the course of the story and carries a strong emotional impact. This stylistic anomaly also alludes to the repeated appearance of the number three in fairytales, which are traditionally built around a set structure that often bases itself on a sequence of three. The character Rumpelstilzchen, for example, in the eponymous tale, helps the Miller’s daughter three times, and then gives her three days to guess his name.

The novel also reflects the repetition characterizing fairytales through its circuitous organization. By means of her magical “Verjüngungswunder” and constant refusal to recognize the realities of her life, Adele begins to step back literally into her own childhood. She enters the circle for the first time as a young girl at the beginning of the story as she runs alone through the streets of Berlin. A Russian soldier named Oleg finds the lost child and brings her back home. The circle closes at the end of the story when Adele, once more in the body of a child, runs alone through the forest outside Lärchenau. Once again she encounters Russian soldiers, one of them called Oleg, but instead of rescuing the child, he kills her: “Oleg struck Adele in the face with the bone-hard back of his hand, so that the blood shot out of her nose. [...] The men carried Adele into the middle of the forest. Oleg hit her on the head. They let her fall. Adele remained with her face lying on an anthill” (Hensel 444-45).<sup>5</sup> Together with Adele’s physical and mental regression into her own real and imagined childhood, the soldier Oleg represents an unavoidable repetition in the novel, but with an important difference—the image of the hero who rescued her in the city becomes the villain in the forest—and this forms a circular torrent of events that can only end in her death. Progress, as represented by Gunter’s astounding advancement in the medical field and as mirrored in the form of adventure or journey in fairytales, is thoroughly undermined in the novel by Adele’s complete physical and psychological regression. Unlike in most tales featuring a young female protagonist, the princess in Hensel’s story marries early and the narrative ends not with a wedding, but with her death, thus deconstructing the convention of the happy ending in idealized fairytales. At the end of the story the princess succumbs to the “monster” who is her husband, and ends up in the heart of the forest, far removed from her “castle”—which, unlike in a fairytale, would not have provided a safe haven for her either.

Hensel’s idea of the forest, like the one that frequently appears in Romantic texts, signifies the wild and strange new life in which Adele finds herself. Yet next to freedom and the possibility of adventure, it also embodies accompanying symbolic danger. Because Hensel

additionally deconstructs the idea that the castle, in the form of the Konarskes' villa, could provide a safe space and instead discloses it as an especially threatening realm that incites violence, she effectively demonstrates that for Adele, there is no safe place on earth.

In addition to the novel's structure, the various fantastic elements that characterize the story are especially commensurate with the supernatural features inherent in the Romantic Movement. One example is the prophetess Mitschka Prohaska, a Holocaust survivor who is additionally marginalized by belonging to the group of so-called "gypsies." Forced to live outside Lärchenau, she is a social outcast who reads the beer foam in the local pub. Although her predictions are often laughed at by the villagers, her abilities—whether genuine or not—reinforce her position as an outsider. Hensel evokes earthy and coarse imagery to describe Mitschka:

The old Mitschka weighed three centners. Her legs seemed as if they were imbued with wood stain. The black woolen skirt hardly managed to cover them. Mitschka smelled like wild garlic and bark mulch. With a colorful scarf done up around her head, she made the impression, even in the greatest heat, that she was cold. The cardigan, frayed in a number of places, said more than its wearer could ever tell.<sup>6</sup> (348)

These connections to the earth and nature, as well as Mitschka's tendency to murmur incantations, show how she can be seen as a witch figure, similar to the supernatural, often antagonistic, and almost exclusively female figures that appear in Romantic works (Daemmrich 34). Like her Romantic predecessors, the "witch" Mitschka's wizened, tattered appearance and woody odors set her apart from the villagers and reinforce the notion that she does not belong to any realm. Mitschka's role as a prophetess reflects a common portrayal of women in Romantic texts, which manifests as a dichotomous juxtaposition between angelic and demonic female figures. Horst Daemmrich terms this phenomenon the "symbolism of the virgin and the vampire" (34). This dualism is visible, for instance, in the contrasted figures of the heavenly Serpentina and the abhorrent, witch-like apple monger in E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Golden Pot*. As an outsider, the witch moves along the borders of society, and despite the implied danger of living on the periphery, her relative autonomy also suggests a potential for agency. In fact, Mitschka, the witch figure, does possess power that the princess Adele lacks. In this character constellation and particularly in the figure of Mitschka, Hensel reinforces feminist notions of witches as they became popular in the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> Mitschka is portrayed as a positive, benevolent figure, while her foil Adele slowly loses her youth and beauty through the ravages of age. By placing the gypsy Mitschka in a superior position and juxtaposing her with Adele, who imagines herself to be Hitler's daughter and who, in spite of her supposedly "higher birth," will have to die, Hensel might indicate a hope for the possibility of overcoming the specter of Germany's fascist past. This potential is also suggested in the fact that Adele's son Timm dies near the end of the novel, whereas Mitschka lives to see the public birth of three grandchildren in the town's center, abundant proof of the continuation of her line.

### **Violence, Gender, and the Family**

Adele's desire for eternal youth, congruent with her self-image of the beautiful princess, facilitates her compliance with Gunter's plan for her astounding "Verjüngungswunder" that begins when she is already a middle-aged woman. In fact, however, this medical experiment

surfaces as Gunter's most violent act against his wife. In general, violence plays a central and vital role in the text and manifests predominantly as brutality against women and feminized figures.<sup>8</sup> This trend is no accident, as violence has always had a culturally gender-specific significance that speaks to a duality of power that exists between the genders, "in which violence of one gender against the other is culturally codified" (Künzel 118).<sup>9</sup> This dynamic is especially salient in the structures of family and marriage, but it also appears in other types of relationships marked by inequality. In the traditionally patriarchal structure of a relationship between two people—whether between husband and wife, father and daughter, or a man and the feminized object of his desire—inequality between them is demanded, and in the case of violence, the figure identified as feminine is ultimately victimized. (Künzel 120).

Hensel's focus on female perspectives in particular relates to the so-called "HerStory" discourse that has developed since the 1970s and which concentrates on the portrayal of this history through a feminine perspective rather than on the almost exclusively male perspective seen in familiar historiography (Öhlschläger 241). Öhlschläger defines "HerStory" as an "attempt to develop the contours of a specifically feminine history, to reinterpret existing historical material and to open the way for new perspectives on the specifically female authorship" (241).<sup>10</sup> The examples of "HerStory" in the novel highlight women particularly as the perpetrators and victims of violence.

These instances of brutality against women are principally concentrated on the main character Adele. Gunter practices not only physical, but also psychological violence against his wife, and he frequently does so in an attempt to substantiate his own power. In his most atrocious crime against her, however, Adele becomes part of one of his medical experiments. Gunter gives her an unknown substance and a syringe, explaining that it is a vitamin supplement that she must inject every day. Adele obeys unquestioningly and continues to do so even after her body and mind begin to show evidence of gradual but startling changes:

In the moments of the penetration of the needle she was very close to her love, felt more with each stab how something flowed within her that made her stronger. Adele was not yet sure of what this strength consisted. Only that, after each application, she felt freshly rested. She felt that she was once again ready to enjoy her villa with pool and garden. And that she wanted to enjoy Gunter. (Hensel 369)<sup>11</sup>

The changes that occur in her body are at first almost unnoticeable, but Adele slowly becomes nearly unrecognizable as a result of her drastically younger appearance. Still, blindly following Gunter's orders, she takes the substance daily without understanding its nature or effects. Although it is Adele's hand that pushes the syringe into her flesh, this duplicitous penetration is instigated by Gunter and his experiment can be considered akin to an act of rape. While Gunter himself does not hold the weapon in his hands, Adele does not know what the substance is and therefore is incapable of giving informed consent. After the effects of the injections start to become clear, however, Adele begins to give herself higher and higher doses, contrary to Gunter's instructions. In this way she manages to reclaim for herself some of the power and control that her husband has exerted over her. Still, Gunter surfaces as the real monster in this fairytale when he also tortures her psychologically. In addition to the unscrupulous experiments

he conducts on his wife, Gunter also unleashes a small, grotesque creature that Adele discovers one day while alone in the house:

In this moment she saw something scamper up the cellar stairs. Out of Gunter's unsupported private laboratory, the secret cabinet, the creature had escaped. No bigger than a mouse. And yet different. Adele fancied that she saw a slit in the back of the animal. The slit opened, and a human eye looked out for a minute, and then it closed back up again.<sup>12</sup> (Hensel 293)

Although the reader already knows that Gunter is performing experiments on humans, this is perhaps his most repulsive trial because it works on such a visceral level. In creating this unnatural monster, Gunter likely gains some scientific knowledge, but the most potent effect of his experiment is the one it has on his wife. Gunter's repulsive creature is clearly meant to terrorize her. Rather than sitting in a cage, it runs freely around the house, and its rodent form plays on Adele's detested nickname "Little Mouse Princess." More than anything, Gunter's creature reflects the true monster in the story: Dr. Konarske himself, a monster with the face of a prince.

A significant variation on the theme of violence against women in the novel is the rape of the young man Helge Hemlock who, both in appearance and in name, is gender ambiguous. His chin is described as "smooth as a girl's" (Hensel 215),<sup>13</sup> although he is older than twenty, and his androgyny is clearly emphasized: "Beyond the mystery of who his real father was, Helge provided yet another: that of his gender. Wheat-blond, with snail-like moving lips, a snub nose and small gold glasses, he seemed as tender as a girl. [He] often didn't know himself where he belonged" (Hensel 215-16).<sup>14</sup> In contrast to the other victims of violence in the novel, Helge's position in the uncertain realm between or even outside of the gender binary arguably makes him even more vulnerable than women to the physical brutality of overtly masculine aggressors. Unlike "the witch" Mitschka, the novel's other outsider, Helge cannot find any safe realm in which he could claim agency. Even the local church cannot protect him sufficiently. Thus, it would appear that the sexual implications of living on the margins seem to outweigh the racial, as embodied by the figure of Mitschka.

In her chapter "Violence/Power" (Gewalt/Macht), Christine Künzel discusses rape as a topos in literature and how the traditional stereotypical assignment of the male as perpetrator and female as victim has been called into question. In more recent efforts to study sexual violence against male victims, the symbolic, rather than mere physical, character of rape has come into focus. Künzel points out that the act is not about sex, but rather much more about power, and that rape "is especially capable of debasing the victim, that is, to make the victim, whether male or female, a woman" (124).<sup>15</sup> Hanswerner Giersch, for instance, the man who rapes Helge, does so partly in an attempt to assert his own power over a person who is otherwise beyond his control (Hensel 243).

Hensel's willingness to confront and undermine prescriptive gender norms characterizes her earlier works as well. In her discussion on gender and the body in Hensel's texts, Lyn

Marven remarks that

[t]hese images of bodies which overrun their boundaries touch upon concerns with female physicality. Hensel engages with expectations of femininity, as they relate to physical features as well as character traits and social roles. In her texts, the refusal to comply with social prescriptions of female beauty is coupled with resistance to the gender roles allocated by society. (194)

This defiance of expectations is also seen in the female figures in *Lärchenau*. The women in the text in part assume the traditionally male role of perpetrators of violence, for example, both against themselves and each other. Additionally, Hensel also manipulates gender expectations regarding physicality. While Adele is generally described as beautiful, her body shows the effects of middle age and her mother and aunt are pronounced to be decidedly unattractive. Helge's androgyny also defies expectations regarding a male figure, but when subjected to violence he is relegated by Giersch to the position of the inferior, that is, the woman.

With the exception of Helge's rape, most instances of violence occur within the circle of the family and private home. Hensel presents the family as a protective and simultaneously stifling space that stimulates vicious and aggressive outbreaks. In her chapter on violence and gender, Künzel identifies the family circle as the nucleus of violence (120). Künzel occupies herself partly with the structure of violence existing within the realm of family and marriage:

[There are] various implications in regards to the *practice* and the *experience* of violence. While the realm of the man traditionally spills out of the private life into the public life, the woman appears to be of the gender determined for the private sphere. From a female point of view, the family in that respect proves to be a heterogeneous realm of violence. The private sphere portrays a seemingly safe social protective space against violence from the outside, in which the woman is solely exposed to the violence *of a man* – of the father or the husband – but on the other hand it also portrays a space of absolute social control, as a type of prison that prevents the woman from developing as an independent person.<sup>16</sup> (120-121)

It would be erroneous to assume that Adele's inability to develop as a person is a direct result of Gunter's acts of violence against her. Her self-destructive tendencies and her distorted self-conception have roots in her past long before meeting him, not least of which in the patriarchal structures clearly associated with German fascism, which dominated her mother's fatuous beliefs. Based on her mother's simplistic outlook on the world which Adele never managed to question, she happily accepts her life as a "woman-at-home" (FrauzuHause) (Hensel 209). In this arrangement, unusual for the GDR, where women of Adele's generation tended to work, she is trapped in the prisonlike space of her marriage, in which any effective or healthy flight for her out of the vacuum of protection and pain is impossible.

### The Body

The female-centered violence in the narrative draws attention to the feminized body as the target of brutality, both in *Lärchenau* and in *Märchen*, and the violated body has an



illustrative and signifying force in the novel. According to Claudia Öhlschläger, the body operates as a medium of cultural production and creation of knowledge and meaning (228). She describes the body not only as a simple biological object, but also as a “sign-bearer of cultural memory” (Zeichenträger kultureller Erinnerung) (228), the traces of which are easily readable. The body functions as the place of inscription of a cultural and collective consciousness, and the “body traces left behind in pictures and texts that give information about hidden and disguised processes of violent discipline and the regulation of the body” (Öhlschläger 228),<sup>17</sup> function as perpetually decipherable representatives of truth and of history.

*Lärchenau* features several examples of the physical body as a place of cultural inscription and memory. After a long absence following his attack, a silent Helge Hemlock reappears in the village, and only the scar marring his otherwise smooth forehead can speak for him of the horrors of his past. Although the wound has long since healed, Helge’s scar still aches, and the physical inscription of memory embodied in the puckered flesh is an example of these “body traces” (Öhlschläger 228). Similarly, Adele, by means of her “Verjüngungswunder”, sheds her age and thereby manages to erase her physical past, but she cannot free herself of her memories. They remain, clearly and visibly etched in the physical effects of Gunter’s mysterious serum. Her body thus becomes a “sign-bearer” of memory, a visible and enduring result of the violence that Gunter has practiced against his wife.

The physical body not only serves as a place of inscription and storage of cultural and individual conscience, but it is also distinctly marked for gender (Öhlschläger 228). Accordingly, memory, and consequently the means by which one accesses memories, are also thus marked. Öhlschläger observes: “There, where the history writing and the fictional shaping of individual historical experience touch, the question regarding gender-specific ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ arises” (240)<sup>18</sup> and with it, a notion of mourning, which according to Öhlschläger “is regarded and still practiced as a specifically feminine occupation” (240).<sup>19</sup> From this mourning, self-inflicted harm or escapism often follow in place of an honest attempt to understand events or a true effort at coming to terms with the past. In the case of Adele, she accepts the bodily violence represented by Gunter’s injections, and disappears thereafter into her physical past in an attempt to escape her psychological one.

Yet Adele’s disappearance as a result of the violence she experiences also indicates a potentially political aspect, to which Garbiñe Iztueta Goizueta points:

[A] commonality [between the characters in the novel] is by all means physical suffering [...]: Hensel’s characters are primarily intensely suffering ones; their bodies are portrayed as traumatised and hardly curable. If we act on the assumption that the portrayal of the body in Hensel’s work is meant as a portrayal of the people, then Germany is presented as an ailing body.<sup>20</sup> (548-49)

If we wish to follow Goizueta’s line of argument, Adele’s female body stands for the body politic Germany, and both emerge as victimized through violence, a tragic history clearly written onto the physical self.

In *Lärchenau* we see the consequences of violence not only on the body, but also on the mind. With the character of Adele, Hensel demonstrates the effects of violence on both the material and immaterial body,<sup>21</sup> but Rosie Konarske is perhaps an even more compelling example. Up until the enigmatic death of her father, she remains the victim of his sexual and physical abuse. The violence against her body, however, also influences her mind. Her father's mistreatment leaves behind deep psychological traces that, while invisible, nevertheless represent clear examples of the marking of history and violence on the body.

Closely related to the effects of violence on the body and the mind is the idea of self-alienation that Goizueta describes:

Hensel's characters are primarily those that devote themselves to physical desires, whereby the psyche and the body are allied together against life's frustrations. The occasional dichotomy between the two in Hensel's figures is a hint that the psyche cannot properly communicate with its own body. The lack of communication with the self leads simultaneously to an identity crisis.<sup>22</sup> (553)

In reference to this dichotomy between the material and the immaterial body, Adele is the representative figure in the novel. There exists within Adele "a tension [resulting from] the opposition between uncontrollable physical urges [...] and the unnatural physical process of becoming younger" (Goizueta 554).<sup>23</sup> This discrepancy between psyche and physical body does not resolve itself even while Adele continues to withdraw from the "real" world by which her body is influenced, and as she disappears into the imaginary world of her fantasy. At the novel's conclusion, a lost and desperate Adele, once more a young girl, runs through the forest. In spite of the steady erosion of her sanity, a final, raw realization occurs to her, one that punctures her fantasy world: "It was cold in her fairy tale" (Hensel 445).<sup>24</sup> In the end, the physical reality of her situation penetrates and overcomes her imagined fairytale and she succumbs to the abuse of her material body.

### **Violence against the Self**

Instances of violence occur against outside forces in the text, but Hensel's novel distinguishes itself also through a disturbing pattern of self-directed violence. Gunter's mother Rosie, for example, begins hurting herself relatively early in her life. The young woman grew up in a violent and abusive environment, which was tolerated and simultaneously overlooked by her mother. This inaction on the part of her mother speaks to an absence of female agency in the oppressive family environment. Rosie carries her difficult past with her and it manifests as self-destructive episodes. At the beginning of the novel, the reader observes a silent power play that takes place between the nurse Rosie and the midwife, who insists on hanging Stalin's portrait in the clinic where Dr. Lingott's painting of poison hemlock had once hung. Rosie struggles in vain to remove the portrait, but finds that it is screwed to the wall. In desperation, she turns to violence in order to find the necessary strength:

Rosie felt her strength disappear and could not do anything more. When the midwife

went home for the night, Rosie would place the leather cuff of the blood pressure monitor on her upper arm, pump it with air, tighter, until her arm hurt and swelled up. Only then did she have the ability to attach the hemlock with tacks to the Stalin portrait. Every morning before work began the midwife would take it away again.<sup>25</sup> (Hensel 55)

Rosie's compulsion to remove the painting derives from a need to resist the imposed and unwelcome presence of the father figure represented by Stalin, especially where it hangs over Dr. Lingott's desk. Through this episode of self-directed violence, Rosie gains agency and manages to tap into a source of power that was previously unavailable to her. After her first success, her self-injury becomes a habit. At one point she attempts to convince her three-year-old son Gunter, who is fascinated by everything sharp and gleaming, to cut into her arm with a pair of scissors: "Her body was so full of numbness that she took a pair of nail scissors, lifted up the sleeve of her blouse and asked the three-year-old to cut out the boo-boo from her arm" (Hensel 65).<sup>26</sup> After his refusal, Rosie begins at first to feign and then actively cause symptoms of a serious illness in order to attract the attention of the new doctor in the clinic, Krause. As the only stable male figure in her life, he becomes an object of her obsession, and every incident of violence represents her fervent hope that he will be able to "heal" her. Rosie's desperate craving for attention extends even to the irrational expectation that she will be able to achieve a new self-identity through these continuous acts of violence towards herself: "The wounds should not close themselves until Rosie knew who she was (Hensel 69)."<sup>27</sup>

This violence towards the self reflects the brutal tendencies in Romantic texts, but it may have another implication as well. Goizueta, for instance, suggests that Rosie's self-directed violence is in fact a result of her complete inability to connect on an emotional level with the people around her. Using acts of violence and self-directed harm, she struggles to reach other people in her life, especially her son and Dr. Krause.<sup>28</sup> Her attempts to connect to other people indicate an effort to achieve agency, but with every misdeed against herself until her eventual suicide, Rosie simultaneously achieves and loses the power, the control, and the attention in her life that she so fervently desires.

Rosie is by no means the only character in the story who suffers from self-directed violence, as Adele also displays self-destructive tendencies.<sup>29</sup> She plays a remarkably more passive role than Rosie, and while she does not directly injure herself, she *allows* herself to be injured. Some part of her even takes pleasure in Gunter's abuses: "Each condescension, every insult provided her simultaneously with revulsion as well as lust" (Hensel 193).<sup>30</sup> The relationship between the couple begins with a power play in which each strikes the other, and then he seizes her: "Gunter closed his fingers even more tightly around Adele's wrist. They stood there for a long time, saw, how their tiny clouds of breath mixed with each other, and neither one wanted to let go of the other" (Hensel 164).<sup>31</sup> This cold and tensely silent game forms the basis of their marriage and dissolves only after Adele begins to recede into her own fairytale world. She recognizes that her husband hurts her, but because of her ambivalent feelings towards these abuses she is simply unable or unwilling to do anything to stop it. Through this inability, Gunter's subtle and insidious acts of violence against her become even stronger.

### Gender and Romanticism

Gender and violence both play substantial roles in *Lärchenau*, and, as mentioned, Hensel also utilizes tendencies characteristic of Romantic works. Some of these themes include, for example, the ideas of longing, insanity, sickness, and alienation, which are all seen through a subjective lens. Hensel concentrates especially on the effect that these difficulties have on the women in the novel. The author explores the traditionally masculine problems and struggles that characterize Romanticism, but she does so primarily through the female perspective. The reader receives an insight into the thoughts and feelings of the women in the novel as they suffer from the same torments as the traditional Romantic heroes. Adele's desire, for example, to take her royal place mirrors the traditionally Romantic sense of longing that we recognize in Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and Hoffmann's *The Golden Pot*. In several female figures, for instance Adele and Rosie, similar moments of insanity and self-destructive tendencies appear, like the ones that characterize the distraught Nathanael in Hoffmann's *The Sandman* or the tormented artist Cardillac in his *Mademoiselle de Scudéry*. Through their suffering and struggles, Hensel's female characters break into the previously closed arena of male experience in the Romantic tradition.

This extensive focus on female perspectives in the novel is an example of the "HerStory" discourse mentioned earlier. Just as the traditionally male Romantic experiences have been taken over by an almost exclusively female focalization, we see in "HerStory" a similar process, by which the entire course of the primarily male-dominated history is shifted to a female perspective. Many women in *Lärchenau*, for example, play the roles of perpetrator as well as victim. They become insane or carry out violent acts themselves, just like many Romantic male figures. The focalization through the female figures as well as a portrayal of female history in the text reinforce the "HerStory" discourse and deconstruct traditional historiographical approaches.

### Conclusion

Hensel's story of violence, family, and an imagined fairy-tale world looks at history through a contemporary lens and offers a new vision not only of the Romantic tradition itself, but also of the ways in which the movement and its elements have been reinterpreted throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Reciprocally, Hensel also uses Romantic and fairy-tale themes and elements to engage with the issues she sees in contemporary society (Marven 233-234). The narrative's reimagined and simultaneously viciously deconstructed Romantic atmosphere employs themes of the body and gender and breaks away from the traditionally patriarchal historical and literary discourse. In deconstructing gender stereotypes and expectations, Hensel destabilizes the idea of the isolated Romantic male by showing *his* longing for an ideal world and a new mythology also to be a valid component of the female experience. In contrast to the Romantic image of the young man alone in an unknown and frequently dangerous world, *Lärchenau* shows the family to be this threatening domain, at the center of which women stand. The family acts as a prison for the female figures in the text, whereas for male characters such as Gunter it represents a realm of power and control. Whether between a husband and wife, parent and child, or a young man and his admirer, the relationships in the text inevitably incite an unstable dynamic that forces one side to a place of power, and relegates the other to the position of the inferior. For the female and feminized victims in the novel, the shocking acts of violence that ensue have become almost commonplace, a routine that repeats itself over and over again and perhaps even points

toward continued and also normalized violence against women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hensel's perversion of the family image, however, helps emphasize the inherent brutality of the violent acts taking place within that realm, and it is precisely this deconstruction of the family circle and the *Märchen* formula that jars the reader out of a complacent reading of the novel and pulls the fairytale to pieces.

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<sup>1</sup> Fairy-tale structures and elements appear in a number of Hensel's works, including *Hallimasch* (1989), *Gipshut* (1999), and *Im Spinnhaus* (2003). Her texts are linked not only by structural and thematic similarities, but a considerable number of characters and places also turn up repeatedly in her stories. Recurring constellations and figures interwoven throughout her body of works reinforce the author's continued engagement with history and its long-term structures.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Menhennet offers an overview of German Romanticism in his book *The Romantic Movement* (London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> All translations are the author's own. "endlich eine richtige Prinzessin zu sein" (Hensel 87).

<sup>4</sup> "Saß Adele nach mühsam verbrachtem Schultag mit Liese am Abendbrotisch, durfte sie die Krone aufsetzen. Alle Müdigkeit fiel dann von ihr ab, und die Hoffnung, heut oder morgen würde ein Mann im purpurnen Mantel vor ihr stehen und sagen: Ich bin dein Vater, komm, wir reiten in mein Schloß!, überkam sie" (Hensel 92-93).

<sup>5</sup> "Oleg schlug Adele mit dem knochenharten Handrücken ins Gesicht, so daß ihr das Blut aus der Nase schoß. [...] Die Männer trugen Adele in das Innere des Waldes. Oleg schlug ihr auf den Kopf. Man ließ sie fallen. Adele blieb mit dem Gesicht auf einem Ameisenhaufen liegen" (Hensel 444-45).

<sup>6</sup> "Die alte Mitschka wog drei Zentner. Ihre Beine waren wie mit Beize getränkt. Der schwarze Wollrock schaffte es kaum, sie zu bedecken. Mitschka roch nach Bärlauch und Rindenmulch. Ein buntes Tuch um den Kopf geschlagen, machte sie auch in größter Hitze den Eindruck, ihr sei kalt. Die Strickjacke, an etliche Stellen aufgedrösel, erzählte mehr, als ihre Trägerin je zu erzählen vermochte" (Hensel 348).

<sup>7</sup> The popularity of witches in Germany in 1970s, starting with the feminist movement, extended to the general population by the end of the decade, as popular exhibitions such as the famous "Hexen" in the "Hamburgisches Museum für Völkerkunde" and the accompanying catalogue of 1979 demonstrate (Hauschild).

<sup>8</sup> The reader encounters the first scenes of violence at the beginning of the story, as Rosie is sexually and physically abused by her father and then injured by her own hand. Liese, Adele's mother, and Lotte, her aunt, also become victims of each other's acts of violence and the young girl Jüpchen suffers physical punishment at the hands of the other girls in the orphanage before she commits suicide.

<sup>9</sup> "in welcher die Gewalt des einen gegenüber dem anderen Geschlecht kulturell festgeschrieben wurde" (Künzel 118).

<sup>10</sup> "Versuch [...] Konturen einer spezifischen Frauengeschichte zu entwickeln, vorliegendes historisches Material umzudeuten und neue Perspektiven auf die spezifisch weibliche Autorschaft zu eröffnen" (Öhlschläger 241).

<sup>11</sup> "In den Momenten des Eindringens der Kanüle war sie ganz nah an ihrer Liebe, spürte mit jedem Stich mehr, wie etwas in sie strömte, das sie bestärkte. Noch war Adele nicht sicher, worin diese Stärke bestand. Nur daß sie sich nach jeder Verabreichung frisch ausgeruht fühlte. Daß sie wieder bereit war, ihre Villa mit Pool und Garten zu genießen. Und daß sie Gunter genießen wollte" (Hensel 368).

<sup>12</sup> "In diesem Moment sah sie etwas die Kellertreppe herauflitzen. Aus Gunters umgelagertem Privatlabor, dem geheimen Kabinett, war das Wesen entwischt. Nicht größer als eine Maus. Aber doch anders. Adele vermeinte, auf dem Rücken des Tieres einen Spalt zu erkennen. Dieser Spalt öffnete sich, und ein menschliches Auge sah heraus, einen Moment lang, dann schloß sich der Spalt wieder" (Hensel 293).

<sup>13</sup> "glatt wie Mädchenhaut" (Hensel 215)

<sup>14</sup> "Über das Rätsel hinaus, wer sein wirklicher Vater sei, gab Helge ein weiteres ab: das über sein Geschlecht. Weizenblond, mit schneckenartig beweglichen Lippen, Stupsnase und kleiner Goldbrille wirkt er mädchenzart. [Er] wußte selbst oft nicht, wohin er gehörte" (Hensel 215-16).

<sup>15</sup> "besonders dazu geeignet ist, das Opfer zu erniedrigen, d.h. das Opfer, ob männlich oder weiblich, zur Frau zu machen" (Künzel 124).

<sup>16</sup> "[Es gibt] unterschiedliche Implikationen in Hinblick auf *Gewaltausübung* und *Gewalterfahrung*. Während sich der [Raum] des Mannes traditionell jenseits des privaten Bereichs im öffentlichen Leben fortsetzt, [...] erscheint die Frau als das in der Privatsphäre ,verortete Geschlecht'. Aus weiblicher Sicht erweist sich die Familie insofern als ein heterogener Ort der Gewalt, als die Privatsphäre einen scheinbar sicheren sozialen Schutzraum vor Gewalt von außen darstellt, in dem die Frau lediglich der Gewalt *eines Mannes* – des Vaters oder des Ehemannes – ausgesetzt ist, andererseits aber auch als Ort absoluter sozialer Kontrolle, als eine Art Gefängnis, das die Frau daran hindert, sich zu einer selbständigen Person zu entwickeln" (Künzel 120-21).

<sup>17</sup> "von in Bildern und Texten hinterlegten Körper-Spuren, die [...] Aufschluss geben über verborgene und verschleierte Prozesse der gewaltsamen Disziplinierung und Reglementierung des Körpers" (Öhlschläger 228).

<sup>18</sup> "Dort, wo sich Geschichtsschreibung und die fiktive Modellierung von individueller historischer Erfahrung

berühren, rückt die Frage nach geschlechtsspezifischen Mustern der Vergangenheitsbewältigung [vor]" (Öhlschläger 240).

<sup>19</sup> "empirisch gesehen das Trauern immer noch als eine spezifisch weibliche Tätigkeit aufgefasst und praktiziert wird" (Öhlschläger 240).

<sup>20</sup> "Als Gemeinsamkeit [der Figuren im Roman] ist auf jeden Fall auf das physische Leiden hinzuweisen: Hensels Figuren sind vorliegend stark leidende Figuren, ihre Körper werden als traumatisiert und schwer heilbar dargestellt. Da wir davon ausgehen, dass die Körperdarstellung in Hensels Werk als Darstellungen des Volkes gemeint ist, wird Deutschland als leidender Körper präsentiert" (Goizueta 548-49).

<sup>21</sup> In *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Judith Butler mentions the question of the boundaries between the physical, or material body, and the immaterial body (1-2).

<sup>22</sup> "Bei Hensels Figuren handelt es sich einerseits um Figuren, die sich ihren körperlichen Bedürfnissen hingeben, wobei die Psyche und der Körper zusammen gegen den Frust des Lebens alliiert sind. Zwiespalt zwischen beiden ist ab und zu in Hensels Figuren ein Hinweis darauf, dass die Psyche mit dem eigenen Körper nicht richtig kommunizieren kann. Mangel an Kommunikation mit dem Selbst führt gleichzeitig zur Identitätskrise" (Goizueta 553).

<sup>23</sup> "eine Spannung [entsteht], in diesem Fall handelt es sich aber um den Gegensatz zwischen unkontrollierbaren körperlichen Bedürfnissen [...] und dem unnatürlichen körperlichen Verjüngungsprozess" (Goizueta 554).

<sup>24</sup> "Kalt war es im Märchen" (Hensel 445).

<sup>25</sup> "Rosie fühlte ihre Kraft schwinden und konnte nichts mehr tun. Hatte die Hebamme Feierabend, legte sich Rosie die Ledermanschette des Blutdruckmeßgerätes um den Oberarm, pumpte sie mit Luft auf, fester, bis der Arm schmerzte und anschwell. Dann erst war sie in der Lage, den Schierling mittels Reißzwecken über dem Stalin-Bild zu befestigen. Jeden Morgen vor Arbeitsbeginn nahm ihn die Hebamme wieder ab" (Hensel 55).

<sup>26</sup> "So von Taubheit war ihr Leib erfüllt, daß sie eine Nagelschere nahm, ihren Blusenärmel hochschob und den Dreijährigen bat, er möge ihr das Wehweh aus dem Arm schneiden" (Hensel 65).

<sup>27</sup> "[D]ie Wunden sollten sich nicht schließen, bis Rosie wußte, wer sie war" (Hensel 69).

<sup>28</sup> Goizueta remarks: "Self-inflicted injury and illness seem in fact to be the only possibility for communication between Rosie and the world; it thus concerns a failure to communicate" (552) ("Selbstverletzung und Kranksein scheint in der Tat die einzige Kommunikationsmöglichkeit zwischen Rosie und der Welt zu sein; es handelt sich daher um eine gescheiterte Kommunikation").

<sup>29</sup> Jüpchen, a young girl who lives with Adele in the orphanage, is constantly harassed by the other girls and commits suicide. Adele feels some guilt for her role and the suicide arguably incites her own self-destructive habits.

<sup>30</sup> "Jede Herablassung, jede Beleidigung verschaffte ihr gleichsam Widerwillen als auch Lust" (Hensel 193).

<sup>31</sup> "Fester schloß Gunter seine Finger um Adeles Handgelenke. Lange standen sie so, sahen, wie sich ihre Atemwölkchen miteinander vermischten, und keiner wollte den anderen mehr loslassen" (Hensel 164).

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