
America: A Modern Day Tauris? A Study of Two Adaptations of the Iphigenia Myth

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Many modern cultures have sought literary inspiration in the mythology and culture of ancient Greece, but the German infatuation with the classical tradition has surpassed all others. In explaining what she termed "the tyranny of Greece over Germany," E. M. Butler wrote, "Germany is the supreme example of her [Greece's] triumphant spiritual tyranny. The Germans have imitated the Greeks more slavishly; they have been obsessed by them more utterly, and they have assimilated them less than any other race" (6). Some German medieval authors, notably Heinrich von Veldeke, dealt with such themes as the Trojan war and the story of Aeneas, but it was not until Winckelmann envisioned Greece as the embodiment of "edle Einfalt und stille Größe" that Germany experienced the true renaissance of Greek antiquity. This interest did not simply mean a heightened awareness of ancient Greek contributions to art and society, but their domination. Butler argues that "Winckelmann's Greece was the essential factor in the development of German poetry throughout the latter half of the eighteenth and the whole of the nineteenth century" (6). While it is clear that the tyranny has abated in the twentieth century, Greek antiquity certainly has not completely relinquished its influence over modern Germany. Numerous authors recognized the ancient themes as analogous to the problems facing modern society. Gerhart Hauptmann's *Tragödiens tetralogie*, for example, is the realization of the union between the classical and modern worlds; Hauptmann used the history of the Atreus family to underline the horrors of the Second World War. In the latter half of this century, the West German fascination in classical antiquity has ebbed, although certainly not disappeared. Despite this decreasing popularity in post-war West

Germany, the ancient Greek culture did retain a firm foothold in the former German Democratic Republic.¹

One mythological family, the house of Atreus—especially the members of Agamemnon's immediate family—has captured the fantasies of authors for centuries. The background and stories based on these characters is well-known. Each of the great tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, dedicated several of their dramatic works to this theme. Many of their contemporaries also recorded their own versions of the lives of Agamemnon, Clytaemnestra, and their children.² This tradition did not cease with the end of Greek classicism, nor has it been contained within the borders of a single country.

The Iphigenia myth,³ central to the Atreus history, can be broken down into three major phases: Iphigenia in Aulis, the site of her "sacrifice"; Iphigenia in Tauris, the site of her "exile"; and Iphigenia in Delphi, a lesser-known element of the myth dealing with her return home. The tale of Agamemnon's eldest child has been passed down in various expanded forms first by the Greek poets, and later awakened the imagination of modern authors. In German literature, Goethe created a literary classic with his version of the myth, wherein he emphasizes the power of humanity rather than the otherworldly.⁴ His Iphigenie has become the embodiment of this humanity, as it was she, not the gods, who resolved the conflict, consequently effecting change in the barbarian state of Tauris, as well as making possible her return home.

Classical antiquity has arguably laid the groundwork of western civilization, but the United States of America has played a leading role in the modern development of Europe. The nation developing across the ocean that embodied the humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment awakened the imagination of the Europeans. The Revolutionary War and the signing of the Declaration of Independence inspired German writers, who "viewed America as the land of political hope for a free society and as the model for a democratic government in their own country" (Malsch 3). Goethe's attitude towards America as reflected in his works "expressed the utopian hopes of a time when the United States became a symbol of the future to all liberal and progressive Europeans" (Osterle 43). In 1956 Harold Jantz condensed the depictions of America into the following four paradigms that are useful in assessing modern West German as well as classical German

literature: "the myth of golden age primitivism in America," "the myth of a brutally, relentlessly savage America that had to be sternly tamed by the force of civilization," "the historical myth of the westward movement of civilization," and "America as the new land of promise" (39). With the formation of the German Democratic Republic, a fifth paradigm has arisen: that of a war-mongering, power-hungry capitalist imperialist. In his article on the East German literary reception of the United States, Zipes indicates that, although there are few works in East German literature that deal exclusively with America (335), the view of the super power as "imperialistische Macht," "anti-demokratischer Staat," and "Sachwalter des staatsmonopolistischen Kapitalismus" was prevalent (329)—attitudes which also became increasingly popular in the FRG in the decades of the Cold War, culminating in the vehement reaction against the Vietnam War.

Modern authors attempting to recreate or reinterpret the Iphigenia myth must pay homage not only to the original Greek sources, but they must also contend with the Goethean ideal, and of course in some manner with the intellectual or social issues of their time.⁵ The same is true of responses to the United States—in the twentieth century to an even greater degree. Since WWII America has been intricately intertwined with Germany. The two nations were first enemies in a brutal war; then the US, with its allies, imposed its control over every aspect of post-war German society. After allying itself with the FRG, the United States contributed to the *Wirtschaftswunder* through the Marshall Plan. America's international policies during the Cold War were often unpopular. Within the context of these nations' complex relationship, there have been numerous interpretations of the nature and validity of US society and values. At least two post-war German dramas combined an attraction to mythology with the growing common interest in the United States: Egon Vietta's *Iphigenie in Amerika* and Ilse Langner's *Iphigenie Smith kehrt heim*. For all their differences, America plays a significant role in each; and each is, in its own way, a reaction to classical antiquity, Goethe's portrayal of *Menschlichkeit* in *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, and contemporary issues.

Both dramas, set in the aftermath of the Second World War, utilize several basic aspects of the myth: the threat of impending war, Iphigenia's separation from her family and homeland (if not her sacrifice), and a cast of characters familiar from the Greek sources. In both

the Langner and the Vietta versions, Nazi Germany becomes the modern equivalent of Iphigenia's Mycenaean home, and the United States replaces Tauris as her place of "exile." Despite the similarities, they relate two different aspects of the Iphigenia myth. Vietta, like Goethe and many of the Greek poets, depicts Iphigenie in exile, while Langner's work, following a minor branch of the classical tradition, is a portrayal of her return home.

Vietta's *Iphigenie in Amerika*, published in 1948, apparently takes place in Washington D.C. (which is confused with Washington State). The events superficially parallel those of Goethe's work, but the character motivation is very different. Langner's *Iphigenie Smith kehrt heim* was begun in 1968, but not published until 1991. Her version takes a step beyond Vietta's adaptation by depicting Iphigenie's return home to Germany. *Iphigenie Smith* departs significantly from the traditional myth in which Clytaemnestra, murderess of her husband, is subsequently killed by her son, who is then persecuted by the Furies. Here the Atreus line remains intact: Agamemnon and Klytämnestra are still alive at the time of Iphigenie's return, and Orest's emotional suffering is caused not by the murder of his mother, but by the mass murder of countless faceless people during the Second World War.

Vietta⁶ (1903-1959) made some interesting adaptations to the family history of his characters in *Iphigenie in Amerika*. Iphigenie was sent to America due to the impending war, while Orest remained with his family because of his intense attachment to his father. In a provocative twist, Agamemnon was a Jew, a fact known only to his wife. In order to be with her lover Horst—a modern day Aegisthus—and to protect her son from the Nazi policies regarding anyone with Jewish blood, Orest's mother willingly betrayed her husband to the Gestapo (45-47). Horst spared Orest Agamemnon's fate by concealing the boy's lineage and making him an officer in the German army. After discovering his mother's evil deed and killing her, Orest escaped to Washington with his teacher, Pylades, in a near insane state in search of the lost sister. Meanwhile, Vietta's Iphigenie has not been living as the priestess of King Thoas of Tauris, but rather as the adopted daughter of the powerful Senator Ismael Vandenberg.

Like Goethe's Iphigenie, who introduced civility and humanity to a barbarous Tauris, this Iphigenie has contributed to the culture of her land of "exile." As she tells the Gorgon—a magical figure who

appears to all except Pylades as if a dream—she has devoted herself to what is beautiful (29). The people in Washington gave her money, which she in turn donated to the *Stadttheater* and other cultural interests—and she has been just as successful in this as Goethe's character was in civilizing Tauris. But whereas Goethe's Iphigenie, through her humanity, was able to save all those she cared for, Vietta's Iphigenie is not the sole impetus for the "happy end," although she does play a crucial role.

The United States was by no means the brutal nation that was Tauris before Iphigenie's arrival. *Iphigenie in Amerika* nevertheless depicts some of the darker sides of American life, images often grounded in reality but exaggerated into parodies. One of the most obvious stereotypes is the character of Arkas, the mestizo. He is the rather simple-minded servant, although more reminiscent of a slave, who is very loyal to Iphigenie. His dialogues awaken images of slavery. Arkas rarely speaks in full sentences and regularly uses the term "Massa": "Der Massa ein Heiliger," "Ich keinen Namen . . . Bebrillter Herr aus Chicago mich getauft auf Namen Arkas" (19). He is treated by his employer and the police as a second-class citizen and is subjected to racist comments and even a brutal beating.

The portrayal of politicians as embodied in the character of Vandenberg, the police, and American justice is quite negative. Arkas' suffering attests to this. The senator is very rich and authoritative, and hardly a man of the people. There are numerous references to his financial worth and the size of his estate, and it quickly becomes evident that the senator believes in the power of money to buy people and information. He assumes that ten dollars will entice Pylades to leave his land and he attempts to buy truth from the Gorgon (23, 31). His greed is surpassed only by his ruthlessness, as Arkas warns the two trespassers: "Massa alle zermalmen, die nicht gehorchen" (25). This characterization of the senator remains constant until the very end of the drama when Orest is accepted as Iphigenie's brother.

American justice, like politicians, has few redeeming qualities in this work. Vietta portrays the realities of democracy as a perversion of the American utopia. When searching for the two fugitives on Vandenberg's property, the police discover that Arkas is aware of their whereabouts. In order to extract the information from him they resort to thumbscrews. When the senator, so obsessed with finding

Orest and Pylades, orders that they be shot on sight if they offer the slightest resistance, the police gladly comply, shooting Pylades so full of holes he is compared with a sieve. In spite of this extreme violence, when Iphigenie asks the police to leave the house, they are forced to do so because "die Dame beruft sich auf ihre unverbrüchlichen Rechte" (61). Unfortunately, these inalienable rights promised by the constitution were not allowed to Arkas and Pylades. Not only are the police in *Iphigenie in Amerika* violent, they take perverse pleasure in their cruelty. When speaking of the thumbscrews they used on Arkas, one detective said: "Doch wir haben ihm das Schwarze herausgepreßt: der war so weiß, wie eine Wand von Kalk" (58).

Langner (1899-1987) wrote *Iphigenie Smith kehrt heim* two decades after Vietta's work, and this distance from the war years seems to account for much of the irony in the piece. Iphigenie Smith is a very different and much more complex work than Vietta's play. In this tale of Iphigenie's return home, for each modern character there is a corresponding classical figure: Iphigenie Smith is visited by the "original" Iphigenie, her mother is confronted by her ancient counterpart, and so on. Iphigenie's family is made up of *Mitmacher*: General Schmidt, a member of the SS, sent Iphigenie to America to separate her from Horst, her lover, whom she falsely believed to be a member of the resistance. Frau Schmidt, leader of the Nazi women's movement, presumably betrayed Pylades and his Jewish lover Esther, and denounced Ägisth, her own lover, who was in turn sent to a concentration camp. Both Elektra and Orest played a role in the betrayal of the young lovers. Only Orest feels remorse for his actions during the war. He has chosen to remain bound to John, a distant American relative, who suffers a similar feeling of guilt. Iphigenie, having spent the war years in the United States, returns as a representative of the American judiciary—with the power of the classical fates to decide the outcome of her family's lives.

Many of the initial images of the United States in Langner's work are stereotypical, as they were in Vietta's. America is deemed the most powerful and richest country in the world (313), and there are several allusions to the Americans as the bearers of both food and justice to a war-ravaged Germany, but only Iphigenie has the naïveté to see these as positive manifestations of a democratic society. The Germans who have experienced the American bombings which killed countless numbers of innocent citizens are not so quick to embrace these "saviors."

Those whom Iphigenie encounters wander the streets, without ever reaping the benefits of the small bits of American kindness.

The American exile of Langner's Iphigenie was not as comfortable as was that of Vietta's. Iphigenie was left by her father in the care of the president of the United States, but she was soon forced to flee his home. The Schmidt name awakened the Americans' yearning for revenge, and Iphigenie was to pay with her life for her father's and Germany's crimes (312). Forced to drop out of society in an act of self-preservation, Iphigenie began a life on the streets, where she was raped by a group of savage young children. The brutality of this act, which caused Iphigenie to lose the child she was carrying, is intensified by the passers-by who either ignored or laughed at her plight. Iphigenie recognized "daß ein Volk, dessen Kinder schon Verbrecher sind, ohne Hoffnung ist" (299).

John Smith, the American soldier and distant relative of the Atreus line, offers damning testimony against his country and its actions during the war. Langner's drama does not distinguish between the crimes of the Axis and those of the allied powers. True, Orest held a high-level position in the SS, and was thus responsible for much suffering and death, but John declares himself to be no less guilty. He was involved in the bombing of German cities, and as Orest points out: "Waren doch bloß noch Alte und Frauen in den Städten—" (294). A casual reference to Hiroshima (316) introduces additional testimony of American guilt. The two finally realize that they are both the same, "Kriegsverbrecher" (304), and in this way are inevitably bound together.

The president in *Iphigenie Smith* is a faceless character, reminiscent of Orwell's Big Brother—he is heard but never seen. On the simplest level he can be seen as the savior of the family, in that he transplants the general, his wife, and their daughter Elektra into American society; he forgives all their previous transgressions, but he does not forget them. His goal is to use each family member's particular skills to bring "order" to the US—a plan frighteningly similar to Hitler's, and one developed, ironically, by Ägisth during his captivity in a concentration camp (316). The president's goal is to take the melting pot of America and build one *Volk* (a Nazi term that Langner pointedly uses), which treasures obedience and discipline above all else (311). Although it superficially seems that the President wishes to transform these people by giving them new names, he is merely transplanting them. The names may have changed, but they are still distinctly Euro-

pean: General Schmidt becomes Paul Schmidt, *Ordnungsminister*; Klytämnestra, now known as Bertha, is to be responsible for "die Sittsamkeit der Frauen Amerikas" (317); and Elektra, now Else, is to become leader of the youth movement. Albrecht, formerly Ägisth, is to act as Schmidt's right-hand man. The president has no use for Orest and John because their youthful idealism renders them worthless for his goal of establishing a new totalitarian state, and Iphigenie, who worked to humanize the barbarian American street children by forming a cult around herself, is banned from returning to the US.

Both authors wrote in the wake of Goethe's influence. In the afterword to his drama, Vietta discarded Goethe's idealistic portrayal of humanism, citing Fritz Ernst's essay on Iphigenie. Although Vietta did not use the following citation in his comments, it aptly applies to his ideas: "Goethe selber mußte anerkennen," Ernst points out, "daß er seine Menschen aus lauter Menschlichkeit ins Übermenschliche gesteigert hatte" (Ernst 29). Vietta turned to "die göttliche [Lösung]" in answer to the brutality of human behavior (76). It is important to note, though, that by "göttliche" he did not mean the Christian God, who, according to Pylades, is a human construct: "Die phantastischste Maske, die der Mensch erfunden hat" (37). This God's effect on human beings has not been positive, as the Gorgon remarks: "Er machte sie [Männer] nicht zu Betern, sondern zu Goldsuchern" (28). Vietta seemed to be striving more towards an awareness of the significance of a super-human force or forces, as was seen in Greek mythology, than a single God subject to the interpretation of humans. He saw this work as an attempt, "das Humane gegen das Titanische, das Außer- und Unmenschliche abzugrenzen" (78). When Orest is finally awakened from his insanity, it is not thanks to humanity, but to Athena—the *deus ex machina* has returned. Numerous times in the drama, human violence is both spoken of and depicted. The violent nature of the police and of Vandenburg is reminiscent of the violence Orest saw both in the war and in his family. Vietta has come to the conclusion that reliance on the goodness of human nature will not bring about peace, prosperity, or fellowship.

Langner, unlike Vietta, does follow in Goethe's footsteps insofar as she consistently portrays her characters struggling without the assistance of a supernatural power. In the wake of the suffering caused by WWII, Langner turned away from the theme of man and woman

that was central to her earlier works and began to focus more generally on the human condition in her works: "Mann und Frau verschmolzen zu einem Leidenswesen. Sie flohen miteinander, zueinander. Ein Mensch versuchte dem anderen Menschen beizustehen—oder auch ihn zu verraten" (Johann 41). The figures in *Iphigenie Smith* are not as noble as those in Goethe's *Iphigenie*, but they are left to find their own humanity. Unfortunately, the family is only transplanted into American society under different names. The wrongs they propagated as active participants in the Nazi regime are actually encouraged by the president. Even the brutal children of the street, whom Iphigenie managed to "humanize" into civilized people, are threatened by the arrival of the transplanted Nazis, as the General plans to attack and destroy them in a night maneuver. All the good that Iphigenie managed to do in America will soon be erased. The curse that has followed the Atreus line from Mycenae to Germany is about to find a new home in the new world. The glimmer of hope for humanity seen in *Iphigenie* and Orest and John, who choose to remain in Europe, perhaps in order to rebuild in the wake of the curse, quickly dims with the appearance of the classical *Doppelgänger* on the stage. Although the curse is being transferred to America, its impetus still lingers in Europe. Albeit hardly an optimistic close to the drama, the departure of those willing to help build a totalitarian America and the presence of Iphigenie, Orest, and John in Germany suggests that any moral revival will come from the old world, not the new.

America has often been touted as a land of humanity, especially after the atrocities suffered in Europe during the Second World War, but there is a counter view, one represented—in very different ways—in these modern dramas, in which this country is portrayed as an offspring of its barbaric Tauris ancestor. Vietta's Orest felt drawn towards the United States in search of his salvation, but he soon became disillusioned, realizing that there is no paradise on earth. America is not being singled out as evil, rather it is being likened to all other products of human endeavor. The lot of the people in this drama is not alleviated until Athena intervenes. Clearly, Vietta's portrayal of America is negatively stereotypical, but he claims to see the possibility for hope, not only because it is "the new world," which he describes in the afterword as the "jungfräulich keuscher Boden" (79), but also because of Iphigenie's presence. He continues, arguing that,

"Wo das Götterbild—Iphigenie, die Hüterin der abendländischen Werte—bleibt, ist die Erlösung" (79). At first glance this might seem a contradiction—but Iphigenie is the only human who understands guilt and repentance, and for this very reason she is receptive to the spiritual influences of Athena and Pylades, who is transfigured into a divine figure in death.

Iphigenie Smith kehrt heim certainly does not leave the reader with much hope for America. The establishment of Ägisth's "new order" could only squelch all glimmers of humanity in the United States—and within the realm of the drama, Iphigenie was America's only link to humanity. *Iphigenie Smith kehrt heim* plays with expectations. No one is as they seem or as one would expect them to be. Iphigenie did civilize the American street children, but she was also very naïve, trusting all the wrong people. Even Ägisth, for whom one has immediate sympathy because of his ordeal in the concentration camp, is not a simple man. Instead of defying the totalitarian regime that put him into the camp, he has refined the Nazi tactics and will now transfer them to another soil. America was not the savior of democracy in western Europe, but a participant in the violence and killing. The American pilot John is not lauded as a hero for his participation in the conquering of fascism. He is instead haunted by his role in bombing German cities.

It is interesting that these dramas, so different in their message, have so many similarities. Not only are both using the classical tradition to reject the optimism of the late eighteenth century, but *Iphigenie in Amerika* and *Iphigenie Smith kehrt heim* also share many common themes in their portrayals of Germany and America as a modern day Mycenae and Tauris. Both Langner and Vietta integrate persecuted Jewish figures into their works. The perversion of the American democratic ideal that had fascinated Europeans just centuries before pervades the dramas. Whereas Vietta offers hope for the new world with the assistance of a spiritual force, Langner does not. Her Iphigenie recognizes the hopelessness after her encounter with the criminal youth of America. Although she was able to restore their humanity, her father's promise to destroy them also destroys all hope for the new world.

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Notes

¹ The reception of classical literature in postwar German—especially GDR—literature has interested countless scholars. One of the most recent studies attributes the East German acceptance of classical influences largely to the leaders of the communist movement, as both Marx and Engels were "hervorragende Kenner des griechischen und römischen Altertums" (263). See Volker Riedel, "Stabilisierung, Kritik, Destruktion. Überlegungen zur Antikerezeption in der Literatur der DDR" *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 2.2 (1992): 258-268. Classical antiquity allowed East German authors to safely consider contemporary issues without fear of political reprisal. Roland Heine focuses on three authors in his discussion of this phenomenon: "Die poetischen Versuche von Peter Hacks, Heiner Müller und Hartmut Lange, im Mythos zeitgenössische Thematik zu verfremden, verweisen auf das Interpretationspotential eines zum Modell erhobenen Stoffes, den freilich schon die noch im Rahmen mythischer Totalität lebenden griechischen Klassiker auf seine Deutungsmöglichkeiten hin erproben" (256). Roland Heine, "Mythenrezeption in den Dramen von Peter Hacks, Heiner Müller und Hartmut Lange" *Colloquia Germanica* 14.3 (1981): 239-260.

² See Herbert Hunger's *Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*. Vienna: Hollinek, 1988. This is an excellent resource with extensive references on Greek mythological and historical figures in literature as well as in music and the plastic arts.

³ There are many acceptable spellings of the figures in Greek mythology. When discussing a character within the context of a particular dramatic adaptation, I will use the author's spelling. In considering the antique figures independent of a particular work, I will use the standardized English spellings offered in *Bullfinch's Mythology*.

⁴ See Wolfgang Wittkowski, "Autonomous Humanity and the Authority of the Gods in the Era of Benevolent Despotism" *Goethe in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Alexej Ugrinsky (New York: Greenwood, 1987): 77-83.

⁵ Two examples of this phenomenon are Eugene O'Neill venturing into Freudian psychology in *Mourning becomes Elektra*, and Jean-Paul Sartre using *Les mouches* as a demonstration of his philosophy of existentialism.

⁶ There is very little biographical information on this interesting figure. He was a prolific author, writing everything from original dramas to essays on existential philosophy and modern theater. His work warrants further attention.

⁷ Information on Langner—dramatist, novelist, poet, and essayist—is more readily accessible than Vietta, but her oeuvre has hardly been given the attention it deserves. A recent study of a number of twentieth-century women dramatists includes several of Langner's dramas. See Anne Stürzer,

Dramatikerinnen und Zeitstücke: Ein Vergessenes Kapitel der Theatergeschichte von der Weimarer Republik bis zur Nachkriegszeit (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1993).

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Stilistische Elemente in der Prosa von Brigitte Kronauer exemplarisch dargestellt an *Rita Münster, Berittener Bogenschütze* und *Frau Mühlenbeck im Gehäus*

Dagmar Schulz

Brigitte Kronauer gebührt in der heutigen Literaturlandschaft zweifellos ein anerkannter Platz. Seit ihrem Debütroman *Frau Mühlenbeck im Gehäus* werden ihre Werke von Rezensenten, Kritikern und Literaturwissenschaftlern in deutlicher Überlegenheit euphorisch gepriesen. Die Autorin selbst wird nach Jürgen P. Wallmann als wichtigste Autorin unserer zeitgenössischen Literatur gefeiert und wurde bisher mit vielen Preisen geehrt.¹ "Brigitte Kronauer ist mit Sicherheit zur Zeit eine der anerkanntesten deutschen Schriftstellerinnen—vielleicht die anerkannteste" (Zacharias *Abendzeitung*).

Der Weg zum Erfolg der Wahlhamburgerin war jedoch müßig und geprägt durch ein zehnjähriges Warten auf Anerkennung. Während dieser Zeit übersah sie der deutsche Literaturbetrieb, und alle größeren Verlage schickten ihre Manuskripte, meist unkommentiert, zurück. Seit 1974 verlegte Brigitte Kronauer in Kleinstverlagen² und gründete im selben Jahr mit Dieter Asmus und Armin Schreiber in Hamburg den "Dreibein Verlag." Dort verlegte sie 1977 *Vom Umgang mit der Natur. Erzählungen*.

Viele ihrer ersten Arbeiten haben Werkstattcharakter und dienten der Erarbeitung ihrer späteren Romanthemen. Warum sie ihren literarischen Durchbruch 1980 mit ihrem Erstlingsroman *Frau Mühlenbeck im Gehäus*, der bei Klett-Cotta erschien, schaffte, wird erst mit ihrer weiteren künstlerischen Entfaltung und einem veränderten Literaturverständnis erkennbar. Dieser Erfolg basierte zum einen auf ihrem Wechsel des literarischen Genres von Erzählungen zum Roman, zum anderen auf dem Erscheinen in einem renommierten Verlag, ganz sicher