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Romy Franks
Brigham Young University

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German Women in the Wild West: Contradiction in Post-WWII Gender Roles

Romy Franks

The period following the Second World War was a time of intense identity reconstruction for Germany. Amidst the political tensions of the ensuing Cold War, one of the principle outlets for redefining German identity was cultural: the genre of film. An uptake in the sales of Western pulp fiction—cowboys and Indians—led to the emergence of the highly successful Karl May blockbuster hits, based on a series of dime novels written by a nineteenth-century Saxon author of the same name. The German public’s reaction to the series, which was produced and released primarily within West Germany, was overwhelmingly positive. The success of these films, coupled with their exploration of social and moral values, caused many to ascribe a newly developing concept of “Germanness” to the series. One key aspect of German identity portrayed on screen was the gender roles of men and women in German society. The attempts to define femininity¹ within the context of the Karl May films became a vehicle for discussing an emerging crisis of post-war masculinity in German society.

Scholars have since discussed post-war German masculinity in May’s books and films. However, both the academic and popular culture conversations overlook the full picture of women’s roles after the war. In light of this oversight, a small collection of post-war newspaper articles—some written by women—adds important insight about the characters, actresses, and women viewers of the films. By analyzing these articles, a tangible contraction over women’s roles materializes: while the Karl May films emphasize the Wild West as a purely masculine territory

1. Rather than contemporary views of what it means to be “feminine,” femininity should be taken in this paper to mean “womanliness” and, in particular, the constructed societal conception of woman and her roles. The term is meant as a female equivalent to masculinity as referenced within the paper.

devoid of women, the newspaper articles depict women as supportive wives and resilient “Pioniersfrauen” (pioneer women).

A Shock to Masculinity: Confronting Post-War Changes

As women’s societal importance in Germany increased in the 1940s and 1950s, the decades directly after the war, the pre-existing concept of masculinity decreased. As if losing the war was not difficult enough, the men who survived quickly discovered that family roles as they had known them no longer existed. Of this shock to German gender roles, Franziska Meyer writes, “A large number of these men were neither physically nor psychologically in a position to resume their pre-war role as head of the family. In no other phase of post-war German history would male identity be so badly shaken.”² Men were not needed as they were prior to the war because women, having handled family affairs for years without support, had learned to manage and move on.

By necessity, desperation, or just pure grit, German women emerged from the war as resilient inside and outside of the home. As the new heads of household or out

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in the streets, women were largely credited for putting the pieces of Germany back together. In fact, many German women earned the nickname “Trümmerfrau” (rubble woman) for their work in cleaning up what remained of the bombed out cities.³ With the involvement of women

in the public sphere during the decades following the war, traditional German society faced “the specter of overly strong women and weak men.”⁴ Dealing with this fear proved more difficult than expected for both men and women.

Despite the vast experience they gained from WWII, German women were expected by society to slip back into supporting roles as wives and mothers at its conclusion. Addressing these changes was a delicate task because reverting to older gender norms meant reclaiming the past. This approach was unwelcome, as it allowed the influence of Nazism to linger in German society. Weedon notes that

during the immediate post-war decades, social life in West Germany and Austria was marked by traditional ideas about the nature and primary domestic role of women. The Nazi

2. Franziska Meyer, “Women’s Writing in Occupied Germany,” *Postwar Women’s Writing in German* (1997) 30.

3. Meyer 30.

4. Uta G. Poiger, “A New, ‘Western’ Hero? Reconstructing German Masculinity in the 1950s,” *Signs* 24.1 (1998) 148.

legacy, together with long-established traditional thinking about women, was compounded by moves, found throughout the Western world, to encourage women to abandon their new-found roles and highly skilled jobs in the wartime production industries. With the return of men from the front, women were expected [to] return to the home.⁵

The idea of revisiting pre-war concepts of femininity was challenged by post-war efforts to stave off Nazism. Thus, in order to advocate for traditional roles for women while also avoiding this stigma, society had to develop a new angle through which to view these traditions. This alternative came by way of a cultural response.

The Appeal of the Films: Leaving the War Behind

Mary S. Hartman notes, by the latter half of the twentieth century, men had long since “responded to the compromising of boundaries between the sexes by periodically redefining the ingredients of manhood and womanhood, all the while quietly surrendering.”⁶ By the time Karl May’s novels were released as films in the 1960s, German men had developed a solution to reclaiming tradition while still reflecting the changes that had taken place during the war. Rather than giving up more ground, the Karl May films appeased men’s concerns by promoting strong masculinity and a different view of femininity. These new “boundaries,” in Hartman’s words, helped men overcome widely spread anxiety and move forward.

The Wild West portrayed in the films allowed German society to distance itself from the immediate German past. With idealized plains and wide-open frontiers, the films invited German men to escape to a world populated by heroic male characters—a simplistic, “morally polarized universe”⁷ where good always triumphed over evil. Tassilo Schneider argues that the “German western offered a ‘new home’ that was neat and clean, a home uncomplicated by personal and social positions and relations, a home unspoiled by sexual and economic threats, a home that, above all, had no past but was all present comfort and future promise.”⁸ The illusion of a wide-open, innocent prairie ensured that the films’ concept of home was unthreatened and untainted by the immediate past. This concept—a prairie practically devoid of women—supported the pre-war viewpoint that women were to take the back-saddle to men.

5. Chris Weedon, “Introduction,” *Postwar Women’s Writing in German* (1997), pp. 4.

6. Mary S. Hartman, *The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past* (2004) 278.

7. Tassilo Schneider, “Finding a New Heimat in the Wild West: Karl May and the German Western of the 1960s,” *Journal of Film and Video* 47. 1-3 (1995) 57.

8. Schneider 63.

The Purpose of the Films: Overemphasizing Masculinity

To the Germans, the Wild West was a man's world. The film *Der Schatz im Silbersee* (The Treasure of Silver Lake) was no exception to this ideal. The film follows two male leads—Old Shatterhand, the strong, blonde, stereotypical German “Westmann,” and his blood-brother, Winnetou, a noble Apache Indian Chief. The two seek to safeguard a fortune hidden in a cave overlooking Silver Lake from a group of money-hungry bandits. Schneider suggests that while the films glorify the many virtues of the main pair, “it is as if the May films strive to protect their male protagonists from the threat of sexuality and to keep them within the confines of a mythically pure, ‘innocent’ (i.e., pre-/asexual) boyhood universe.”⁹

Removing the gender question from the equation was a natural response for a society recovering from war because it generated a simplified moral universe. Schneider adds that “May’s utopia is based on the radical suppression of the social and ‘psychological’ forces that threaten to throw it into turmoil—specifically, the problems posed by sex, economics, and national history.”¹⁰ Such a “suppression” meant there was “no place for women in this utopia.”¹¹ But this potential solution to the German society’s struggles with morality was problematic. May’s stories suggested that having a “clean” and “unspoiled” home meant leaving out women almost entirely, an impossible task given their increased societal importance and presence following WWII. Filmmakers quickly realized that they had to portray women and romance in the films if they were to reach their audiences successfully.

The Film Adaptations: Redefining Femininity

Claims about May’s underscoring of masculinity undoubtedly prove true when looking at May’s writings themselves. However, newspaper articles from the post-war era point out that the film adaptations diverge from the literature. Although women as a group were mostly withheld from May’s original writings, the films of the 1960s consciously added them back in. Yet by attempting to add more substance to the female character, the Karl May crew had more liberty in deciding how to portray women as they saw fit.

Filmmakers’ attempts to embellish Karl May’s original portrayal of women reflect the conflicted view of femininity during the post-war era by presenting a paradoxical view of a strong woman. On her portrayal of the cowgirl Ellen Patterson in *Der Schatz im Silbersee*, actress Karin Dor said¹² that in “all of his books, Karl May conceded only minor roles to women. But, if only for dramatic reasons, the screenwriter was gallant enough to build up the character of Ellen

9. Schneider 57–58.

10. Schneider 58–59.

11. Schneider 59.

12. Translations of these newspaper articles as they appear in this paper were done by Franks.

Patterson.”¹³ Even still, Patterson remains a supporting character in the cast. Actress Dor expresses, “Above all [building up Patterson] means this time to prove oneself in the saddle and with a shooting iron.”¹⁴ Although the films showed women in larger roles than the novels originally did, this was not necessarily a breakthrough for women. Filmmakers’ portrayal of the women suggested they were secondary to their male counterparts.

The Newspapers’ Commentary: Recognizing a Paradox in Women’s Roles

As is apparent in newspaper commentary about the films, Dor’s efforts to create a stronger female character of Patterson were not enough to redefine women’s roles. One newspaper article explained, “With Karl May, Ellen Patterson is a 15-year-old chick. In order to let a little love bloom in the hard world of men, the screenwriters have made Ellen into a 3-years older girl in a leather vest, who the cowboy Fred Engel, played by Heinrich George’s son, Götz, falls in love with.”¹⁵ Ultimately, the West is still a man’s world where the character Ellen Patterson—whether as a romantic interest or merely as a romanticized ideal of a cowgirl—may have only been given more lines to satisfy her role as the lover.

Furthermore, Dor’s comments about “prov[ing] oneself in the saddle and with a shooting iron” might suggest a favorable step forward for post-war women. But there exist more reasons to doubt. Just after Dor talks about her active role in the film, she adds that it ends with her capture by the bandits. The newspaper article concludes, “Karin Dor says that laughing. Surely she knows that she makes a great character and that she has forfeited nothing of her charm as a Westwoman in a suede leather skirt.”¹⁶ This statement highlights the irony between a woman who interprets her character as a strong, gun-shooting, saddle-suited woman but who is reduced by her audience to a smile and a leather skirt.

The Newspapers’ Praise: Emulating Women in Supporting Roles

In light of this overemphasis on Dor’s womanly charm, other newspaper articles suggest an additional purpose for female characters in the films. The women of the Karl May films were meant to play a supporting role to men, providing an ideal archetype for the German women who came to watch them. For example, Mrs. Butler’s character was portrayed positively by one newspaper as “one of the women that supports her husband when her destiny requires it from her.”¹⁷ That

13. C. Cirsten, “Teufelsweib und Mädchen im Wilden Westen: Marianne Hoppe und Karin Dor in dem Karl-May- Film ‘Der Schatz im Silbersee,’” 2. Unpublished report, held in collection of the Hochschulbibliothek der HFF “Konrad Wolf”, Potsdam, Germany.

14. Cirsten 2.

15. “Moral und Marterpfahl.” Unpublished report, held in collection of the Hochschulbibliothek der HFF “Konrad Wolf”, Potsdam, Germany.

16. Cirsten 2.

17. Cirsten 2.

same article noted:

Perhaps it will go down in film history as a curiosity, that in the first German Western . . . both female lead actresses Marianne Hoppe (Mrs. Butler) and Karin Dor (Ellen Paterson) do not strut along in silk and satins, but in every day clothing at the sides of their men, simply as women like you and I are.¹⁸

German women were expected to support men on and off-screen.

Just as actresses were at the sides of their men onscreen, German women were expected to support men off-screen. Even in less serious circumstances, the films built a congruency between the actress and the female viewer. For instance, one article notes that audience members should expect

to become googly-eyed over the male actors in the film, simply because the female cast members did:

The romantic charm with which [Pierre] Brice plays the noble chief of the Apaches excited the female actresses of the film, Marianne Hoppe (farmer's wife, Mrs. Butler) and Karin Dor (Ellen Patterson), so much already during shooting in Yugoslavia, that the delight of female theater-goers over this Winnetou is to be expected.¹⁹

As these newspaper articles suggest, the films offered an example of the ideal post-war German woman that the general, theater-going female populace could aspire to be.

The Films and Newspapers Together: Defining the Ideal Post-War Woman

Providing an illustration of the ideal post-war German woman was perhaps the greatest accomplishment the Karl May films could contribute to the cultural discussion of German identity. But amidst such blatant contradiction regarding women's roles, what exactly might this archetype entail? Ultimately, the films suggest that a good German woman was not only well mannered; she was the moral impetus for a fallen country. She brought an aspect of peace to a worn, war-torn society. In one article, Karin Dor's character is described as "the quasi-girl element that [is] willing, to bring a little civilized behavior into the entity existing as the man's world of fighting."²⁰ Another article argues that the Karl

18. Henckel, Liselotte. "Wo Frauen zu Helden werden: Die Prärie liebt keine Puppen/ 'Der Schatz im Silbersee' – mit den Augen einer Frau gesehen." Unpublished report, held in collection of the Hochschulbibliothek der HFF "Konrad Wolf", Potsdam, Germany.

19. Lore Götz, "A Women Named Winnetou: Women Also Swoon for Karl-May Heroes/ About the Color Film 'Der Schatz im Silbersee'." Unpublished report, held in collection of the Hochschulbibliothek der HFF "Konrad Wolf", Potsdam, Germany.

20. Cirsten 2.

May films did not esteem the German woman for her appearance, though the actresses were quite pretty. Rather, the very title of Liselotte Henckel's newspaper article "The West Doesn't Love Dolls" suggests that more was expected of these German women. Women in the prairie were not "men devouring, sexually radiant beauties," but "painted from the hard, every day exertions," so they were "unkempt and quickly withered."²¹ Henckel noted, "What Mrs. Butler experienced, in a hard, relentless world of men, millions of contemporary women in the last war and post-war days have also experienced and suffered."²² Unlike Hollywood's done-up women, this supposed "grungier" look of a pioneer woman was glorified, because it was an honest and true portrayal of women, particularly one with which the post-war female movie-goer could relate.

Although these characteristics of the ideal German woman were primarily good, she remained a walking, talking, (and occasionally horseback-riding) embodiment of contradiction. At the same time that women were portrayed as gritty and strong from their lived experiences, West German newspapers simultaneously "applauded the images of strong masculinity and obedient femininity in many westerns,"²³ seen most acutely from their position as supportive to men. Ultimately, these newspaper articles reiterated the contradictory roles proffered to women in German society. Rather than speaking up against the genre's masculine dominance—"to be at odds with male-dominated culture and society"²⁴—the novels, the films, and the press continued to reinforce widely held opinions and norms by encouraging women to be content with the ideal female character offered them.

As reflected in a review of current scholarship and a selection of contemporary newspaper articles, the Karl May films showcase German society's attempt to reestablish German masculinity by redefining German femininity. Rather than simply critiquing a genre where women were second in the saddle, these newspaper articles demonstrated the contradictory views of West German gender roles held in the post-WWII period—that German women were to be both admired for their gritty femininity and yet applauded for their supporting roles to their husbands. These conclusions reflect the tension felt by a nation exploring the prairies of post-war women's roles in society.

21. Henckel.

22. Henckel.

23. Poiger 157.

24. Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs* 14.1 (1988) 152.

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Brave

Erin Kaseda

“I love being a woman.”

Why do those words roll like marbles
Feel so round and right
Spilling over my lips
Ricocheting off the floors and shattering ceilings

Why is it so radical to identify with my identity?

To love being a woman
You must love being vulnerable.

To love being a human being, period, you have to love being vulnerable

But I think that women, especially, have to relearn every day
How to define vulnerable
How to be naked without despising nakedness

And it's not just removing pieces of armor
Meant to protect your heart and stomach and brain
It's harder than that
Because women don't learn to put on armor one piece at a time.

I was fourteen years old when I learned
A boy could say he wanted to rape me
And call it a joke.

And there isn't time to slide on your wrist guards
Or buckle on a shield
You just buckle
Knees give out

And the fetal position protects the most important things,
You think,
And your arms cover your head
And you have made yourself so small
And you get tough fast.

“I love being a feminist.”

What a notorious identity.

How can those five words start a forest fire
Are they the smoldering cigarette?
Or a lifetime of dried out weeds?

And yeah, I’m fiery
“Passionately angry and deeply felt”
Because there is something to be angry about
When iron-jawed angels fought to die to survive
And you won’t open your mouth and say that you see that there’s something
wrong here.

I was sixteen years old when I learned
A boy can use “you should be grateful I’m not asking for more”
When you say no.

I was sixteen years old when I learned
Girls can be shot
For wanting other girls to learn to read.

I am not overreacting.

“I love being a daughter of God.”

And now suddenly there are too many ways
To be politically incorrect
I can’t have all three, you say:
Woman, feminist, Christian

If you take away one third of my identity
I’m a two dimensional line.

And the toxicity is suffocating
When you keep denying that there is something wrong here.

I was eighteen years old when I learned
That in Rwanda, civilian Tutsi women were raped
And intentionally infected with HIV
Mutilated or left with sick bodies housing sick babies
As a tactic and weapon of war.

I was eighteen years old when I learned
A male bank teller got the number of my underage friend from her account
And tried to ask her out.

I was eighteen years old when I learned
That thousands of women in the country where my sister wants to live
Remain in abusive relationships
Because you can't get job promotions if you're divorced.

I was eighteen years old when I learned
That I love being a Christian feminist woman
And that is terrifying
And that is brave.

So do not tell me that I cannot love that there are women who are strong
enough
To tell their stories and say
There is something wrong here.

Because there is something wrong here.

