

# **The Most Dangerous Presumption: Women Authors and the Problems of Writing Satire**

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## **Abstract:**

The essay discusses the question why it is that women writers are almost absent from the canon of satirical writing. While female writers have managed during the 20th Century to establish themselves in all genres of literature, satire, with very few exceptions, has remained a territory for male writers. One of the main arguments for this absence is the fact that satire is one of the most aggressive forms of humour. While the tabooisation of aggression, which to a certain extent undermines satire, also applies to male authors, the position of the female writer, already rendered precarious by its deviation from the norm, is exacerbated by her position as a satirist and as a woman. German writer Gisela Elsner (1937-1992), lately being referred to as an “older sister” to Elfriede Jelinek, has accurately described this position as a “literary ghetto.” The example of the reception of Elsner’s work demonstrates how a blocking-out of a certain female tradition of satire reveals not only the limits, but also the blind spots of feminist-leaning women’s literature studies.

1 “Why is it that women write so little satire?” (“Warum schreiben Frauen so wenig Satiren?”) is a question posed in 1984 by Hilde Wackerhagen, and one that is still valid today. Even though gender theories have been informing literary scholarship since the development of feminist literary criticism in the 1970s, the theory of satire (so far) seems to have been largely untouched by them, and companions to (German-language) literature even now mention (almost) exclusively male writers,<sup>1</sup> without discussing in any shape or form why this choice has been made. Paul Simpson notes in this regard “that the tradition of canonical satire is overwhelmingly male-dominated” (56). This is all the more surprising, since German-speaking writers such as Gisela Elsner and Elfriede Jelinek were drawing attention in interviews early on to the discrimination taking place against satire by women (*Interviews with Hoffmeister*) and Anglo-American studies are now also bringing into the discussion the aspect of satire as a “gendered genre” (Knight 6 f.; see also Simpson 55 f.) or “‘manly’ genre” (Kairoff 276).

## **The Absence of Women Authors from the Canon of Satirical Writing**

2 In an essay anthology published in 1992, literary scholar Christiane Rasper noted that “the specific features of ‘female’ satire [had] not yet [...] been made the subject of theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> The only exception in more recent German literary lexica is Elfriede Jelinek (Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft 359; Metzler Lexikon Literatur, 679). The Encyclopedia of Satirical Literature (Snodgrass) mentions Aphra Behn and Colette.

consideration in studies of satire” (“die Spezifika ‘weiblicher’ Satire bisher [...] noch nicht zum Gegenstand theoretischer Überlegungen innerhalb der Satire-Forschung gemacht worden [seien]”; 292). Not much has changed in this regard even up to now. It is true that a few comprehensive studies on the Grotesque and Satire as literary genres have been published over the past few years, but hardly any of these raise the thorny issue of the problematical position of female writers and their work. In one recent study on the literary tradition of satire, Charles A. Knight claims that, because of a “virtual absence of women as satirists before the twentieth century (and hence their absence from much of the study as well)” (7 f.), satire is “more-or-less a masculine genre” (6). Even younger female writers such as Felicitas Hoppe note that “[i]n this country of ours, even satire is firmly in male hands. In fact, it is all relatively fixed and hardly includes any women at all” (“In diesem unseren Lande ist auch die Satire in festen Händen. Das ist eigentlich alles relativ festgelegt, und Frauen sind da kaum dabei”; 254). Against this background, it is all the more surprising, that feminist literary criticism has up to now hardly addressed this topic (Rasper 292).<sup>2</sup> The same is true of the theory of satire, at least in the German-speaking countries.<sup>3</sup> So why is it, then, “that no woman has ever made a mark in satire” (Worcester 13)? And why is it that there are hardly any works of literary scholarship yet that deal with satirical texts by women writers?

### **Satire as the Most Aggressive Form of Humour**

3 The arguments raised against satire have always been many and varied. Some of the most common accusations levelled, and of interest here, are the “built-in obsolescence” (“*Zeitverfallenheit*”; Gaier 333) of satire, the suggestion that it reduces characters to caricatures (Gregson 4 f.; see also Hodgart 188), with, concomitantly, its supposed lack of empathy with its characters and, finally, its tendency to take political sides with a one-sided moral and political stance (Arntzen, *Satirischer Stil* 1). But the most serious criticism of satire has less to do with its aesthetic status than with its gesture, specifically its aggressive potential, “[b]ecause satire is so close – in intent, effect, and often in form – to actual vituperation” (Eden 589). The humour of satire, unlike other forms and genres of humour, is not conciliatory, but aggressive, hurtful. Aggressiveness is an essential feature of satire in various social and cultural contexts: “All satire attacks something.” (Elliott 22) Ulrich Gaier, following Robert C. Elliott, interprets satirical language as a “weapon” (“*Kampfmittel*”; 335) in an “*assault upon an ‘outrageous reality’*” (“*Angriff auf eine ‘empörende Wirklichkeit’*”; 4).

<sup>2</sup> Exception to this are the studies by Heidemann-Nebelin, and Stauß.

<sup>3</sup> The Anglo-American and French traditions are different, cf. among others the studies by Nussbaum, Kairoff, and Duval/Martinez.

Christoph Deupmann, sees the grounding of satire's problematical position as being in particular in the "tabooisation of aggression" (*"Aggressionstabu"*; 20) in modern bourgeois society: "the exiling of the satirical from the civilised world is thus in line with the stated aim of the banishment of violence from the culture" (*"Dem postulierten Ausschluß der Gewalt aus der Kultur entspricht daher die Exilierung des Satirischen aus der zivilisierten Welt"*; 8). For Deupmann, who follows Brummack's definition of satire as "aesthetically socialised aggression" (*"ästhetisch sozialisierte Aggression"*; Brummack 282), this means that the aggression inherent in satire as a form of writing renders its position precarious (12).

4 The problematical status of women writers who dedicate themselves to satire as a mode of writing is largely due to the fact that the literary attitude inherent in satirical texts harbours a potential for aggression which, in the final analysis, is intended destructively (Arntzen, *Nachricht* 572; see also Rasper 291). If we look at the history of women's writing, we see that aggressiveness, brutality and negativity are literary gestures which have been appropriated by only a very few women writers. "The more aggressive the jokes become, the less we see women involved in making them." (*"Je deutlicher die aggressive Tendenz im Scherzen ist, umso weniger wurde die Aktivität von Frauen betrieben"*; Kotthoff 214). Even in work being written by women today, aggressive forms of humour are still the exception.

5 While the tabooisation of aggression, which to a certain extent undermines satire, also applies to male authors, the position of the female writer, already rendered precarious by its deviation from the norm, is exacerbated by her position as a *satirist* and as a *woman*. The prohibition of female aggressiveness, and even denying its existence, has a long tradition (Musfeld; Stauß 73). Since rejecting female aggressiveness involves a taboo which has been and is still propagated and upheld by women themselves, this aspect is more or less a blind spot even now in feminist interrogations of constructions of femininity (Musfeld 17 ff.). Studies arguing from an essentialist and/or biologicistic point of view and proceeding from the assumption of a more or less 'natural' inhibition in women against aggression are still doing the rounds, such as the one by Zita Dresner on Femininity and Humour:

Perhaps because women have been the child-bearers and homemakers, assumed or been prevailed upon to accept the role of civilizers and stabilizers of society [...]. Perhaps because women have had a history of coping with powerlessness, lowering their sights, modifying their needs, and compromising their desires, their humor has been less volatile and nihilistic than men's. (153)

6 While the focus of research on violence has now (following Foucault) switched to the *productive* aspects of (male) violence as the centre of interest (Meuser 53), no such trend can (yet) be discerned in Women's and Gender Studies. The productive effect of female

violent acts has up to now, if at all, been dealt with predominantly within the framework of criminology. As Tamara Musfeld explains in her study of the taboo against female violence, aggression “[covers] indeed not only destruction and hate, but also productive forms, which are essentially necessary for the development of autonomy, i.e. setting boundaries, assertion, self-assertion and defence of one’s own interests” (“[umfasst] ja nicht nur Destruktion und Hass, sondern auch produktive Formen, die wesentlich zur Autonomieentwicklung, d. h. zur Abgrenzung, Durchsetzung, Selbstbehauptung und Verteidigung eigener Interessen notwendig [sind]”; 8). This is also the drift of Deupmann’s argument, with regard to satire, when he refers to the “dialectical relationship between ‘destruction’ and ‘production’” (“dialektische Beziehung von ‘Destruktion’ und ‘Produktion’”):

By attacking its target using the aesthetic means of comic alienation, fictionalisation, ironisation or paradoxical, stylised figures, satire’s destructive act itself becomes an eminently productive process, one of “productive destruction.” Indem Satire ihr Objekt mit Hilfe ästhetischer Mittel der komischen Verfremdung, Fiktionalisierung, Ironisierung oder paradoxen Stilfiguren attackiert, gerät der destruktive Akt selbst zu einem eminent produktiven Vorgang, zur “produktiven Destruktion.”] (30 f.)

Against this background, it is more than surprising that the intensive discussion of the subject of violence that is going on in literary and cultural studies has not yet resulted in any (re-) involvement with satire.

7 If we look at reviews of satirical and grotesque texts by female writers, however, we gain the impression that irony, ridicule, polemics and sarcasm are exclusively the preserve of the male of the writing club. “For historically, women are more frequently to be found in the role of the laughed-*at* than of the one doing the laughing, rather the butt of ridicule, jokes, obscenities and laughter than having something to laugh about themselves” (“In der Geschichte sind Frauen denn auch eher in der Rolle der *Verlachten* als der Lachenden vorzufinden; eher sind sie Objekt von Spott, Witzen, Zoten und Gelächter, als daß sie selbst etwas zu lachen hätten”; Weigel 172; see also Kotthoff 208 f.). Thus, the female sex is the preferred butt of satirical ridicule (Hodgart, chapter 3; see also Nussbaum). Simpson speaks in this connection of “a deeply misogynistic practice in canonical satirical writing” (56).

### **The Evil Eye: Women Satirists**

8 Women writers who employ satirical modes of writing are, conversely, quickly branded, and not just by male critics, as unfeminine, as “witches with the evil eye” (“Hexen mit dem bösen Blick”), as “wily devils” (“abgefeimte Biester”) or “bitches” (“Luder”; Morrien 496 f.; see also Rasper 291). By contrast, male authors displaying such aggressive

behaviour are regarded in a positive light, even being awarded a literary label of their own, that of the 'angry young men' who gained a lot of attention in the 1950s.

9 But it is not just the taboo against female aggression that has to be held responsible for the reticence of women writers in the area of satire. The contradictions thrown up by the social status of women are reflected in its precarious position between classical literary genres and in the "borderland position of satire at the edges of poetry" ("Grenzlage der Satire am Rande der Poesie"; Deupmann 35). Satire shares with literature written by women the "taint of the 'lesser genre'" ("Makel der 'niedereren Gattung'"; Hinck 12). So if a woman writer ventures into the territory of satire, this effectively amounts to a "multiple marginalisation" ("mehrfache Marginalisierung"; Peiter 53; see also Dresner 139) and contributes to the reinforcement of her already precarious position as a woman *and* as a woman writer. The German writer Gisela Elsner has accurately described this position as a "literary ghetto" ("literarisches Ghetto"; *Autorinnen*). Against this background, Horace's comment about the riskiness of writing satire (*Satires* II.I., 60-62; see also Brummack 296) has special resonance for the woman writer of satire. The ensuing paradoxical situation of participating in and at the same time being excluded from the culture (Bourdieu 196-203) lead to contradictions which also inform the work of women writers: "satire presupposes the deep sense of participation, socially and culturally. Only the club's members are allowed to make fun of it." ("Satire setzt das tiefe Gefühl von gesellschaftlicher, kultureller Teilhabe voraus. Nur die Mitglieder eines Clubs dürfen sich über denselben lustig machen"; Wackerhagen 139). If the position of the author (in the sense of *auctor*) already presupposes a high degree of authority, it is crucial for satire to succeed that its author possesses sufficient *authority* "to justify his punishing actions and empower him to comment on what he sees around him" ("die sein strafendes Vorgehen rechtfertigt und ihn zur Kommentierung der Erkenntnisvorgänge befähigt"; Schönert 29). Susan Purdy notes in this connection that "all joking 'masters' discourse, and thereby seizes ideological power and constructs and confirms socio-economic power. [...] And in patriarchy, the power of joking significantly supports and is appropriated by 'natural' male authority." (147) Against this background, the presumptuousness of assuming the role of author appears to be a significantly greater challenge, if not actually a risk, for a woman writer in the case of satire (Kairoff 277).

10 When the (West) German writer Gisela Elsner proclaims that "[b]efore me there were women writers like Ina Seidel, Marie Luise Kaschnitz, Ingeborg Bachmann and Ilse Aichinger. I was the first woman to write a satire, namely *Die Riesenzwerge* [*The Giant Dwarfs*]" ("Vor mir gab es Schriftstellerinnen wie Ina Seidel, Marie Luise Kaschnitz,

Ingeborg Bachmann und Ilse Aichinger. Ich war die erste Frau, die eine Satire, nämlich *Die Riesenzwerg* schrieb"; *Interview with Hoffmeister* 116), this should not be seen purely as a provocation, but also in a certain sense as deliberate presumption. This is entirely the sense in which Elfriede Jelinek describes Gisela Elsner's work as "the critical presumption of satire that is constantly emphasising its critical distance from its figures, although this distance is in itself a presumption" ("die kritische Anmaßung der Satire, die ihre kritische Distanz zu den Personen immer wieder betont, obwohl schon diese Distanz eine Anmaßung ist"; *Ist die schwarze Köchin da?* 25). If the very fact of a woman being a writer in itself constitutes a challenge to male authority, then the female writer daring to enter the territory of satire is presuming a quasi "divinely judgemental" authority that has been felt to be problematic even in male satirists (Deupmann 270; see also Lazarowicz 2 f.), but is interpreted as sheer blasphemy in women writers. The problem involves the fundamental exclusion of female comedy deriving from the fact that "beneath the comic act there is always a transgression to be found, even if it is only a transgression in language" ("dem komischen Akt immer eine Art von Normbruch zugrunde liegt, und sei es nur die Brechung einer sprachlichen Norm"; Kotthoff 210). "A woman's not supposed to do that," ("Das steht einer Frau nicht zu"; *Interview with Hoffmeister* 125) as Jelinek replies to the question of satire in her work. It is quite in this spirit that a critic said in a review of Elsner's debut, *Die Riesenzwerg*, "Elsner would probably have been burnt as a witch for this way of seeing things a few hundred years ago" ("Wegen dieses Blickes hätte man die Elsner vor ein paar hundert Jahren wohl als Hexe verbrannt"; Schöfer)

11 Of course Elsner knew that women writers had written satirical texts before her.<sup>4</sup> But by deliberately blocking out these names she is alluding to the fact that there was and is (still?) no female tradition of satire. At the same time, by making this statement, Elsner is anointing herself as the founder of such a tradition that is appropriating a "male"-connoted way of writing (Knight 6). While female writers have managed during the 20th Century to establish themselves in all genres of literature, satire, with very few exceptions, has remained a territory for male writers. By making this provocatively pointed statement, Elsner draws attention both to the lack of a female tradition in satire and to the gender exclusivity of the literary process itself. "Even the American *Time Magazine* says that a woman has here conquered a male-held territory" ("Sogar das amerikanische *Time Magazine* behauptet, daß hier eine Frau ein Terrain der Männer erobert hat"; *Interview with Hoffmeister* 116). Elsner

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<sup>4</sup> Such as Marieluise Fleißer, Mela Hartwig, Anna Seghers, Erika Mann, Irmgard Keun, Veza Canetti etc. (Heidemann-Nebelin). But the essential difference between these women writers and Gisela Elsner is that Elsner wrote exclusively satire

was convinced that, with the appearance of her debut, *Die Riesenzwerg*, and its winning the "Prix Formentor" in the mid-1960s, she had "opened a certain door for all women writers" ("allen Schriftstellerinnen eine gewisse Tür aufgemacht"), and that, since she had been "crucified" by the critics ("alles auf dem Deckel [bekam]"), others would have "a much easier time of it" ("es dann einfacher [hätten]"; *Interview with Hoffmeister* 116). Elsner also refers to the typical German attitude to satire by observing, with an eye to Britain and France, that satires by women writers in West Germany were still seen "like trips to the brothel, exclusively a male affair" ("wie Bordellbesuche ausschließlich als Männersache"; *Vereinfacher* 123).

### **Offside: German satirist Gisela Elsner (1937-1992)**

12 In the feuillets (cultural pages of the newspapers), she was celebrated and feared as a "writing Cleopatra" ("schreibende Kleopatra"; Künzel, *Schreibende Kleopatra*) and an "Amazon with the evil eye" ("Amazone mit dem bösen Blick"; Elsner, *Autorinnen* 137). Her trademarks were her "Cleopatra-look" wigs and thickly-applied eye-liner. Just like Elfriede Jelinek's, Gisela Elsner's public appearances were carefully staged. With this conspicuous get-up, which to a certain extent became her trademark, Elsner would certainly have had what it takes to be a "literary icon," given her being talked about retrospectively beside Ingeborg Bachmann as one of the few female stars among Germany's young writers of the Sixties. But less and less was heard during the Eighties from the once so-celebrated author of her debut *Die Riesenzwerg* (*The Giant Dwarfs*) (1964). In the end, her novels were hardly reviewed any more in the serious press and critics finally had no inhibitions any more about letting rip mercilessly in their reviews, gleefully demolishing Elsner's works. "The critics were tired of Gisela Elsner's books [...]" "Die Kritik hatte Gisela Elsners Bücher satt [...]" (Spiegel 43). Elsner's last novel, *Fliegeralarm* (*Air Raid Warning*) (1989), for example, was described by Heinz Ludwig Arnold in the *Zeit* as "embarrassingly wretched and cynical prose" ("peinlich miserable und zynische Prosa"; *Nichts als Ruinen* 47).

13 Against this background, Sigrid Löffler's claim that "probably no writer in the Western world has attracted as much hostility in the past few decades as Elfriede Jelinek" ("[m]ehr Feindschaft als Elfriede Jelinek [habe] wohl kein Schriftsteller der westlichen Welt in den letzten Jahrzehnten auf sich gezogen"; 10), should be relativised, since Jelinek herself has noted that Gisela Elsner and her work "were dropped in a pretty unparalleled way" ("auf eine Art fallengelassen wurde[n], die eigentlich ziemlich beispiellos ist"; *Ist die Schwarze Köchin da?* 24) by the literary crowd. The writer's suicide in May 1992, too, was used by

some critics as a final opportunity to "put the boot in" (Kunstreich, *Eine Kommunistin*). These things only happen, and to this extent Sigrid Löffler is in principle right to take Jelinek as an example, to a women writer: "the whole literary crowd, the feuilletons, critics, the lot, were increasingly openly hostile to Elsner. [...] this sort of thing as well can only happen to women" ("die elsner wurde vom gesamten literaturbetrieb, dem feuilleton, der kritik zunehmend offen angefeindet. [...] auch sowas passiert nur frauen"; Meyers 9). Perhaps this should be qualified by saying that this sort of thing happens especially to women writers who step over the line of gender-stereotyped "feminine" forms of writing and devote themselves to such forms as satire that take an offensive stance.

14 While, however, Jelinek has had a dedicated (albeit to begin with small) group of fans, among both literary critics and literary and theatrical academia, from the beginning of her literary career, Elsner has never, even now, received such recognition, even in part. Animosity (in some cases even hostility) against Elsner has remained firm even after her death. Even now, just the very mention of the writer's name is enough to set off "emotional reactions" [emotionale Reaktionen] in "representatives of the literary crowd" ("Vertretern des Literaturbetriebs"; Kunstreich, *Hoffnung* 48). This seems to be an example of that widely-distributed, unfair short-circuit, even among serious literary scholars and critics, whereby "the wickedness of the writing [is taken to be evidence of] wickedness in the writer" ("von der Bösartigkeit des Geschriebenen auf die Bösartigkeit der Schreiberin [geschlossen wird]"; Löffler 12).

15 Elfriede Jelinek is not only now an established part of the literary canon, but also, much to the outrage of many a critic, and not just in the German feuilletons, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2004. In contrast, the work of her "older sister" ("ältere Schwester"; Rutschky 20) has been sliding gradually into oblivion, so that Elsner and her works have today been as good as eradicated from academic literary studies, and even from women's literature studies, and from the consciousness of readers. "Gisela Elsner is simply dead and gone" ("Gisela Elsner ist einfach tot und weg"; Kinder 292).

16 If Elsner was still at least present with short stories and/or novel extracts in anthologies and textbooks into the Eighties, she was completely erased from the literary and academic memory from the Nineties until the appearance in 2000 of the film *Die Unberührbare* (*The Untouchable*). To try to tie in with the film and ride the tide of its success, the Aufbau Verlag in 2001 published the correspondence between Gisela Elsner and Klaus Roehler under the title *Wespen im Schnee* (*Wasps in the Snow*) and, in the same year, a paperback edition of *Die Riesenzwerg*. Since there was, however, only very muted interest in



these editions, the press was reluctant to bring out new editions of other books by Elsner. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that there are to date hardly any literary studies available dealing exhaustively with Elsner's work.<sup>5</sup> In spite of the fact that Elsner has left behind a considerable body of work – in just under thirty years she published nine<sup>6</sup> novels, two volumes of stories, a volume of collected essays, three radio plays and an opera libretto – hardly any of her other books, apart from *Die Riesenzwerge*, republished in 1995 and 2001, are generally known today.

17 The “literary sensation of 1964” (“Sensationsautorin des Jahres 1964”; Brock 19) slipped slowly but surely into oblivion. Her social and literary isolation certainly owed much to her joining the German Communist Party (DKP) in 1977 and her subsequent commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideas and utopias, but also, and mainly, to her literary programme of satire, which constantly set her at odds with fashion and “at odds with the literary norm” (“quer zur literarischen Norm”; Cremer/Winter 11).

18 The image of the “thrown-away thorn” (“des entsorgten Stachels”), that Hermann Kinder has proposed with regard to Elsner's position in the literary world, is perfectly accurate in this context, since it plays on the hurtful nature of satire. It is astounding that this writer's work has not (yet) been rediscovered as part of any scramble to rediscover “forgotten” writers, and in particular women writers: “What is surprising [...] is that a literary scholarship that bestows its favour so lavishly on literature by women [...] has simply ignored Gisela Elsner” (“Erstaunlich [...] ist, daß eine Literaturwissenschaft, die ihre Gunst so verschwenderisch für Frauenliteratur ausstreut [...], Gisela Elsner schlichtweg ausgeblendet hat”; Kinder 292). Not even her suicide in May 1992 did anything to change this situation – an act which is otherwise seen to a certain extent as a guarantee of admission to the Olympian realm of rediscovered women writers.

Gisela Elsner's suicide has never achieved the mythical immortality [...] either of Sylvia Plath's or of Ingeborg Bachmann's. The reaction to Gisela Elsner's death, which, indeed, was already the lot of her work during her lifetime, since it was in a way just dropped, [is] in fact fairly unparalleled [...].

Gisela Elsners Selbstmord hat weder die mythische Unsterblichkeit [...] einer Sylvia Plath noch die einer Ingeborg Bachmann je erreicht. Die Reaktion auf Gisela Elsners Tod, der ihrem Werk ja schon zu Lebzeiten beschieden war, indem es auf eine Art fallengelassen

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<sup>5</sup> The only exceptions to this are the studies by Flitner, Cremer, and Mindt

<sup>6</sup> This includes the novel *Heilig Blut* (*Holy Blood*), which was only published in Russian, in 1987, during Elsner's lifetime. The first German edition was not published until 20 years later.

wurde, [ist] eigentlich ziemlich beispiellos [...].] (Jelinek, *Ist die Schwarze Köchin da?* 24; see also Kinder 293)

19 What is also practically unparalleled in the literary world is the fact that there was no ‘reconciliation’ with the writer, even after her tragic death (Kunstreich, *Unversöhnter Abgang* 53). This means that the work of the most radical, and probably most significant, female satirist in contemporary German literature has up to now hardly been paid any attention in literary scholarship (Künzel, *Einmal im Abseits*). And this is in spite of the fact that Elsner was celebrated in the feuilletons, even during her lifetime, as “a successor to Swift” (“Nachfahrin von Swift”; Dallmann), and also, retrospectively, as “a master of the satirical grotesque” (“Meisterin der satirischen Groteske”; Polt-Heinzl, *Ausbruch*). At least her novel *Die Riesenzwerg*e has now been admitted to the canon of masterpieces by 20th Century German-speaking women writers (Künzel, Gisela Elsner). In this sense, Elsner can certainly be seen as a forerunner of younger writers such as Elfriede Jelinek; her works were and are no less provocative (März 64).

### **Sisters in Satire: Gisela Elsner and Elfriede Jelinek**

20 The correspondences between Gisela Elsner and Elfriede Jelinek are many and varied, even though little or no attention has been paid to them up to now in scholarly writing on Jelinek. The points the two writers have in common were recognised at an early stage, then forgotten or rather suppressed for some 25 years and not rediscovered until the mid-1990s. When Jelinek submitted her first manuscript, *bukolit*, to Rowohlt Verlag (which was also Elsner’s publisher from 1964 to 1986) in 1969, it was rejected on the grounds that with Elsner the publisher already had one woman writer under contract with a “predilection for vegetative monstrosities, cannibals and blackheads” (“Vorliebe für vegetative Monstrositäten, Kannibalen und Mitesser”; Flitner 43 f.). Although Elsner had been acclaimed as “humorist of the monstrous” (“Humorist[in] des Monströsen”; Enzensberger 15) her name is hardly ever mentioned in studies on humour, comedy or laughter in women’s writing.

21 Yet these parallels were never discussed during Elsner’s lifetime, either in the feuilletons or in literary scholarship.<sup>7</sup> It was only after her death, in the mid-90s, that Gisela Elsner was recognised “alongside Elfriede Jelinek, who was nine years younger and established as a woman writer in the literature of the post-war period to a degree that Elsner was not” (“an der Seite der neun Jahre jüngeren und ungleich etablierteren als eine Autorin der Nachkriegsliteratur”; Polt-Heinzl, *Ich war die erste Frau* 193), and this in spite of the fact

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<sup>7</sup> The only exception to this is the study by Flitner.

that the two writers had themselves already, in interviews in the 80s, been pointing out common features in their writing and acknowledging their respect for each other in no uncertain terms. Thus, Jelinek said in an interview with Donna Hoffmeister in August 1985: “By the way, I have a great similarity with Gisela Elsner in terms of a certain wit and a certain irony” (“Übrigens mit Gisela Elsner habe ich eine große Ähnlichkeit in Bezug auf einen gewissen Witz und eine gewisse Ironie”; 122). In the same book of interviews, Elsner, who made no secret of her contempt for the ‘new women’s literature,’ was very positive in her enthusiasm for the younger writer Elfriede Jelinek: “I do not like reading [...] those kinds of books by women. [...] Elfriede Jelinek rises way above them by writing satire. She is one of the best, I think.” (“Ich lese [...] ungern solche Bücher von Frauen. [...] Jelinek bewegt sich durch Satire darüber hinaus. Sie ist eine der Besten, finde ich”; Interview with Hoffmeister 115).

22 In 1995, there were two publications at much the same time on connections between the two writers. One was Hermann Kinder’s afterword to a new edition of *Die Riesenzwerge*. Kinder sees parallels between Elsner and Jelinek, especially in their “attempts to produce a disrupting female gaze” (“Versuche[n] eines störenden weiblichen Blicks”; 292) – he is referring to the “offensive sharpness of Elsner’s gaze” (“anstößige Schärfe von Elsners Blick”; 293) – and in their leaning towards “negativity” (“Negativität”; 294). The other 1995 publication was Christine Flitner’s study of the reception of the work of Elsner and Jelinek in the *feuilletons*, and this is not only significantly more extensive than Kinder’s essay, but also teases out correspondences between the two women writers at quite different levels. For Flitner, Elsner and Jelinek are “the two most important women satirists in post-1945 German-language literature” (“die beiden wichtigsten Satirikerinnen der deutschsprachigen Literatur nach 1945”; 40). The key word ‘satire,’ however, although an aspect connecting the two writers, is one that, just like their political positioning, the two of them perceive differently.

23 While Elsner’s avowal of a satirical mode of writing has increasingly been criticised and dismissed as an anachronism since the 80s, there has been hardly any discussion of the satirical aspects of Jelinek’s work, either in reviews or in scholarly criticism. “It is surprising that this comic and satiric component in Jelinek’s plays, which is present throughout [...], is hardly remarked upon by critics” (“Erstaunlicherweise wird diese komische und satirische Komponente in Jelineks Stücken, die durchgängig vorhanden ist [...], in der Rezeption kaum wahrgenommen”; Uecker 93 f.) – one exception to this being the study by Heidemann-Nebelin, which does not, however, draw any correspondence between the two writers. This is all the more surprising, given that the two writers consciously perceived that they were both

breaking into a male territory with their satirical mode of writing, and were thus both at odds with the definitions of ‘women’s writing’ or of a ‘feminine aesthetic.’ As Flitner correctly notes, the “general connotations of female authorship – empathy, restriction to subjects and genres with specific relevance for women and linguistic powerlessness [run] contrary to the conditions of satire” (“verbreiteten Konnotationen weiblicher Urheberschaft – Empathie, Beschränkung auf Themen und Genres mit spezifischer Relevanz für Frauen und Sprachhohnmacht – [...] konträr zu den Bedingungen der Satire”; 45). Although the constitutive features of a satirical mode of writing include precisely the stylisation of characters even to the point of caricature (Gregson, esp. Introduction), it is an accusation that has been levelled against both writers again and again that it is not possible to identify with the characters they have created and that the writers show no empathy with their characters. But to judge from the accusation, also levelled equally at both writers, that the writing has no positive elements, it would appear that academic literary criticism has missed the point of the genre of satire.

24 While, however, Jelinek is thoroughly able to inscribe herself into an Austrian tradition of satire (Interview with Hoffmeister 122), this possibility was hardly available for Gisela Elsner. The tradition of satire in (West) Germany subscribes on the whole to a more harmless and less hurtful kind of humour than the scathingly hurtful satire of Karl Kraus, for example, who is explicitly cited by Jelinek. It is only in this context that Elsner’s provocative claim to have founded a German-language tradition of women’s satire can be fully understood (Interview with Hoffmeister 116). How could it happen, then, that the only woman satirist in contemporary German letters has been as good as forgotten?

### **Woman Satirist in a "Literary Ghetto"**

25 A literary canon is not a homogeneous affair. Every genre develops its own canon to a certain extent. What has happened to Gisela Elsner is that she has been excluded from the very two canonical systems in which she could have attained significance, namely the canon of satirical literature and the canon of literature by women writers. By the 1980s, the literary environment in which Elsner’s texts were seen had changed. The aesthetic programme of the ‘new women’s literature’ overlapped to a not inconsiderable degree with a general trend shift that took place in literature in the 70s, the main feature of which was its distancing itself from the heavily politicised literature of the late 60s and, according to Laemmle, turning towards a “literature of experience” (“Erfahrungsliteratur”; 169) (with the tag “new sensitivity” (“neue Sinnlichkeit”; 155). This development meant that Elsner was unable to gain appropriate

recognition as a writer in either of the two canonical systems that might have been open to her ("satire" and/or "works by female writers").

26 The shift towards a "new subjectivity" or "new inwardness" (Möhrmann 339) was flanked by post-structural, deconstructivist theories of literature, the result of which was a general "retreat into [...] nothing-but-subjectivity or else into purely linguistic processes" ("Rückzug auf [...] Nur-noch-Subjektivität oder auf die reinen Sprachprozesse"), a withdrawal "from tackling the central problems of society" ("aus den zentralen Problemstellungen der Gesellschaft"; Arnold, *Anmerkungen* 37). The genre of satire, to which Elsner stayed loyal all her life, was diametrically opposed to such a literary programme. While in the 60s and 70s academic literary studies on satire were still appearing, even literary academia was increasingly silent on the subject of satire from the 80s onwards. Unlike Anglo-American or French philology, literary scholarship in Germany is practically ignoring satire nowadays, a state of affairs which is due not least to the lasting influence of postmodern literary theories (Schwind) and the associated revival of the aesthetic of autonomy (Hermand 810 f.). Satire clearly (no longer) has any place in the programme of a postmodern "aesthetic of non-commitment" ("Ästhetik der Unverbindlichkeit"; Hermand 59), one of the main features of which is the play of the "subjective imagination, of free association [...] and self-reinforcing self-reflection" ("Subjektiv-Imaginativen, der freien Assoziation [...] und der sich verstärkenden Selbstreflexivität"; Hermand 77 f.).

27 Elsner detected very early on the dismissive attitude held towards satire in a time when "precisely the incomprehensible [...] [was] taken to be significant" ("gerade das Unverständliche [...] für bedeutsam gehalten [wurde]"; *Bandwürmer* XVI) in literature, commenting that "here [in Germany] satirical texts are quite openly dismissed as a twisting of the facts, unlike poetry, in which it's perfectly okay for the reader to be presented with stuff snatched out of the air" ("Satiren werden hier [in Deutschland] im Gegensatz zur Dichtung, in der dem Leser getrost blauer Dunst vorgemacht werden darf, recht unumwunden als Tatsachenverdrehung abgetan"; *Vereinfacher* 124).

28 For the writer Gisela Elsner and for the reception of her work, then, several unfavourable factors came together that have contributed to a situation today where hardly anybody even knows her name, let alone the titles of any of her books. One of the main factors was the rise of the "new women's literature," the dominance of postmodern deconstructive theories in (feminist) academic literary studies and the concomitant evaporation of interest in satire as a mode of writing.

29 In the course of the emancipation movements in the 1970s and 80s and the establishment of the genre of “new women’s literature” (Becker-Cantarino), women’s studies developed a version of literary history, one of the main achievements of which was that it made sure that the absence of women writers from the literary canon in itself became a subject of discussion and that a large number of women writers were rediscovered; but at the same time, in conjunction with the creation of feminist literary scholarship, a preference developed for certain theories, and this had an effect on the canon of major works that can hardly be underestimated. From the combination of feminist academic literary studies, psychoanalysis and deconstructive theories<sup>8</sup> a canon came into being in which it was hardly likely that the work of a writer like Gisela Elsner could find recognition. For one thing, her texts resist any psychoanalytical approach, even though they do sometimes include satirical allusions to Freudian theories (e.g. *Die Riesenzwerg*); and in any case, the satirical mode of writing is incompatible both with the demands made of “women’s writing” for empathy and the description of personal experience, and with the requirements of deconstructivist literary theory (or at least with the version of it that is practised in (West) Germany). Elsner, with her satirical mode of writing, is at odds with these tendencies, and at odds with the literary and “academic environment of humanities and cultural studies that owe allegiance to French ideas of post-history” (“Umfeld der auf die französischen Posthistorie-Vorstellungen [...] eingeschworenen Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften”; Hermand 3 f.).

30 While the gender system and order of the sexes, marriage, power and sexuality play a central role in a few of Elsner’s books, such as *Das Berührungsverbot* (*No Touching*), *Abseits* (*Offside*) and *Die Zähmung* (*The Taming*), women are not primarily presented in Elsner’s work as “victims” of the patriarchal order, but (like the wives in *Das Berührungsverbot*) as being accomplices, profiting (in part) from this system and/or being just as dominant and domineering when the opportunity arises for them to get into a position of power (like Bettina Begemann in *Die Zähmung*). The novel *Die Zähmung* is not, however, merely the “Chronicle of a Marriage” (“Chronik einer Ehe”), as its subtitle suggests, but at the same time a scathing settling of accounts with the genre of “women’s writing” of the 1980s.

31 In her novel, Elsner draws attention to, among other things, the dangers and problems associated with the proclamation of a “female aesthetic,” a subject that was debated with great engagement in feminist literary and cultural studies in the late 70s and early 80s. The assertion of a “female aesthetic” runs, and not just in Elsner’s view, the risk of perpetuating

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<sup>8</sup> The focus in introductions to “feminist theory” or “feminist literary theory” is clearly on deconstructivist and psychoanalytical theories and on discourse analysis after Foucault (Becker-Schmidt and Knapp; see also Lindhoff).

essentialist and biologicistic aspects of gender difference by defining women's art in terms of criteria that overlap with the only-too-familiar female stereotypes of autobiographical features, sensitivity, emotionality, inconsistency and irrationality, self-reflection and finding oneself. Values such as "originality, objectivity, dispassion, the ability to think logically, the ability to see the big picture and the confidence that is expressed as wit, satire and irony" ("Originalität, Objektivität, Sachlichkeit, die Fähigkeit, logisch zu denken, die Fähigkeit, größere Zusammenhänge zu erfassen, sowie die Souveränität, die durch Witz, Satire und Ironie zum Ausdruck kommt"; Elsner, *Autorinnen* 141), continue, accordingly, still to be reserved for male writers. I don't write in the way that, in their opinion, a woman ought to write. They've tried again and again to cram me into this women's writing box. I just don't fit. Their malevolent efforts have been no use. The only way they can talk about me as a writing woman is in biological terms. Ich schreibe nicht so, wie eine Frau ihrer Ansicht nach schreiben muß. Sie haben immer wieder versucht, mich in diese Frauenliteratur hineinzuschieben. Ich passe einfach nicht hin. Ihre böartigen Bemühungen haben nichts genutzt. Sie können mich als schreibende Frau nur aus biologischen Gründen erwähnen. (Elsner, *Interview with Hoffmeister* 116)

32 Satirical texts by women writers have been considered, if at all, in women's literature studies and literary scholarship with a leaning towards gender theory only if they deal explicitly with the topics of gender struggle, sexuality and power and more or less explicitly present women as being the victims of the patriarchal order. Even the few recent studies of women satirical writers, such as those by Heidemann-Nebelin and Stauß, seem to operate within this limited parameter. Thus, a situation has come about whereby women writers who have *also* written satire are inscribed into the canon of female satirists, while a writer such as Elsner, who produced a large body of satirical work, is in this context merely mentioned by name in the introduction (Heidemann-Nebelin 2). Christa Reinig, some ten years older, and Elfriede Jelinek, some ten years younger, are thus treated as favourites in a canon of female, respectively feminist satire (Heidemann-Nebelin) – while Gisela Elsner is not.

33 With *Das Berührungsverbot* (*No Touching*), regarded in retrospect by critics as a forerunner of *Lust* (1989), the novel of Jelinek's that caused such a scandal, Elsner, described in an obituary as a "latter-day sister of Cassandra" ("späte Schwester Kassandras"; Berger), suffered the same fate as with many of her books: they came too soon to be accorded the recognition they deserved (Polt-Heinzl, *Zu früh geboren* 80). The blocking-out of a certain female tradition of satire reveals not only the limits, but also the blind spots of feminist-leaning women's literature studies. It means that the categories of this (counter-) canon of

literature by women writers are just as questionable and seem just as exclusive as those of a traditionally 'male'-dominated literary canon (Heydebrand/Winko 150 ff.). But even the most recent studies and literary lexica are still propagating the image of a canon of satirical writing that is dominated by male writers, continuing the prejudice even now that says that satire is "more-or-less a masculine genre" (Knight 6).

*Translated by Catherine Hales*



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