

Cindy Walter-Gensler

Käte Kestien's *Als die Männer im Graben lagen*

WWI Criticism through the Lens of Motherhood

“They were just all out of their minds, the sons, the teachers, the fathers – all of them. Only the mothers saw how it really was; they sensed how it would turn out. How it did turn out.”
(Clara Viebig, *Töchter der Hekuba*¹)

Literary responses to WWI exist in abundance, and much has been written about the literature of this “war to end all wars.” Yet, as has been decried by past scholars, criticism makes little reference to German women’s writing on this subject,² and if it does, it primarily views the works of bourgeois or aristocratic authors as relevant to the topic (e. g., Catherine O’Brien and Hans-Otto Binder). One example is the more recent research of literary critic Andre Kagelmann on Thea von Harbou (2009; 2014), as well as historian Silke Fehleemann’s study that focuses on writers such as Margarethe Böhme (1867–1939) and Ida Boy-Ed (1852–1928), who, in telling stories of their own social and class-bound background, thematize war-related issues of “bourgeois families that have connections and kinship relations all through Europe” (2014, 75). Further reflecting the social status of socioeconomically privileged women, novels about nurses on the front line, positions held predominantly by single, upper-class females,³ became an extremely popular genre.⁴ In contrast, writers rarely focused on the experiences

1 All translations from German into English are my own unless otherwise stated. Originals significant for my argument can be found in notes following the translations: “Sie waren eben alle nicht bei Sinnen gewesen, die Söhne nicht, die Lehrer nicht, die Väter nicht – alle nicht. Nur die Mütter sahen, wie es wirklich war; die ahnten wie es kommen würde. Gekommen war” (Viebig 1917, 150).

2 In their introduction to *Intimate Enemies: English and German Literary Reactions to the Great War 1914–1918* (1993), Franz Karl Stanzel and Martin Löschnigg write, “Much remains to be done, however, in an assessment of the share of [German] women writers in Great War literature” (35). Ironically then, only one of their volume’s twenty-eight essays features novels by female German authors, namely Walter Hölbing’s contribution “‘Cultural Paradigms’ and the ‘Gendered Eye’: World War I in the Works of U.S. and German-Language Women Authors,” which discusses two novels by Hedwig Courths-Mahler and Ina Seidel.

3 See Schönberger (2002) on the social backgrounds of German nurses in WWI, especially 88–89.

4 Bestselling novels of this category are, for instance, Anny Wothe’s *Die den Weg bereiten: Ein Zeitroman* (Those who prepare the way: A novel of its time, 1916), Adrienne Thomas’ *Die Katrin*