

## Christa Winsloe (1888-1944)

„What you call sin I call the great spirit of love of thousand shapes.“ Using these words Fräulein von Bernburg defends her pupil Manuela von Meinhardis in the classic boarding school film *Mädchen in Uniform (Girls in Uniform)*. But the strict headmistress, a female „Old Prussian“ has a very different view. She considers Manuela’s openly declared love for her warm-hearted and understanding teacher as pathological. God forbid, that other pupils might be infected by this modern „pestilence“! Manuela is punished with strict isolation for her rebellion against the Prussian order and for her declaration of love. Feeling desperate and let down Manuela wants to end her life. About to jump over the banister she is rescued in the last second by her classmates and her teacher. A victory of love, of lesbian love over Prussian drill and blind obedience?

Christa Winsloe, born December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1888 in Darmstadt as an officer’s daughter, entered the Potsdam boarding school Kaiserin-Augusta-Stift as pupil after the early death of her mother. In this institution young noble girls were drilled to become mothers of soldiers and to learn discipline and submission. As an adult Winsloe had to write down this nightmare to get it off her chest. Yet the result, a play, does not end as positive as the film. Manuela is destroyed because of Fräulein von Bernburg’s rejection. The teacher had not dared to side Manuela against the headmistress and to oppose the brutal educational methods. The pupil commits suicide. Nevertheless we owe Christa Winsloe the first sensitive play on female homosexuality in the Weimar Republic yet without a radical critique of the social discrimination of lesbian women.

The play came out in 1930 in Leipzig under the title *Ritter Nérestan (Knight Nérestan)* and in Berlin as *Gestern und heute (Yesterday and Today)*. The success prompted the film version *Mädchen in Uniform* becoming the world’s best film of the year. This was not only due to its ambitiously aesthetic form and the fact that only women performed. Equally important was the reduction of the lesbian aspects in this film version and their depiction as adolescent crush even though Winsloe co-authored the script and Leontine Sagan acted as director who in *Gestern und heute* had stressed the lesbian aspect. But Carl Froelich held the artistic supervision. He not only changed the final scene but also put an emphasis on the critique of Prussian education and militarism. Contemporary critiques confirm this reduced and sexually

toned down view. Lotte Eisner wrote after the opening in November 1931 in the *Film-Kurier*: „The almost unbelievable, a film only with woman actors grips us. A film concerning all of us because it socially goes to the bottom of a human theme, unsentimentally exceeding private interests. The film is about humanity, about the backgrounds of the system. A past world? It is yesterday and today; again it threatens to rise again, to overwhelm what a healthy youth education tries to create in a more modern time. (...) The inevitable consequences of narrow-minded life in a boarding school can be seen: one searches the other, suffering together grows into loving together in times of awakening desires. Adolescent disturbances or feelings for the same sex - the film leaves this open which is a good thing (...).“

The play and the film were shown all over Europe, in the USA and even in Japan made Winsloe world-famous over night. Already as a sculptor she had not been unknown. Against her family's consent she had been studying sculpture from 1909 on at the Munich arts and crafts school, a profession to be considered „unfeminine“. Her interests had been especially in sculpting animals.

By marrying Baron Ludwig Hatvany (1880-1961), a rich Hungarian writer and landowner, she followed the conventions in 1913. After the war and the failure of her marriage she moved to Munich and started writing along with sculpturing. Her features were published in newspapers and periodicals like *Vossische*, *Berliner Tageblatt* and *Querschnitt*. But her first plays were not performed.

After *Mädchen in Uniform* had come out Christa Winsloe devoted herself totally to writing. In 1932 the play *Schicksal nach Wunsch (Fate as wanted)* had the first performance at the Berliner Kammerspiele. The play's main theme are traditional gender relations. But in the description of the lesbian senior physician Franziska „Franz“ Schmitt as „modern spinster“ the author confirms existing prejudices rather than criticizing them. Soon after she wrote the book of the film *Mädchen in Uniform* correcting the moderate happy end. As *Das Mädchen Manuela (The Girl Manuela)* it was published abroad as early as 1933 in the newly founded department for exile literature of the Amsterdam publisher Allert de Lange. Using the Vienna Tal publisher as front man Allert de Lange was even able to deliver a few copies to Germany until the beginning of 1936. The book was translated into many languages and became a bestseller. In Germany Christa Winsloe, the so called aristocratic rebel, did not publish any more. She could not accept the conditions (e.g. the „Aryan certificate“) of

minister of propaganda Goebbels' „Reichsschrifttumkammer“ (German literature department).

After the beginning of the Third Reich Winsloe travelled even more than before. As a Hungarian by marriage and as non-Jew she experienced no immediate threats and was able to help persons at risk to leave Germany or to work as a courier. In 1933 her partner was the US-American journalist and European correspondent Dorothy Thompson (1894-1961) who very early had warned against Hitler and who was expelled from Germany in August 1934. They spent their time together mostly in Italy and the USA. But Winsloe could not settle herself as a writer in America. Hollywood did not accept her scripts and writing in a foreign language was problematic for her. Tired and disillusioned she returned to Europe in 1935 and spent her time within the next years travelling between Italy, Hungary, Austria and Germany.

Soon all Winsloe's books and articles were on the Nazi index of „undesired literature“. The author was considered as „politically unreliable“. Though Goebbels had described *Mädchen in Uniform* in his diary from February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1932 as „magnificently directed, exceptionally natural and exciting film art“ it was forbidden to be shown by now. Women's love was a taboo though not prosecuted.

With rapidly diminishing publishing possibilities in German-speaking areas Christa Winsloe had her next book, *Life begins*, immediately translated into English. The partly autobiographical novel was published in 1936 followed by the American edition in 1936 under the title *Girl alone*. The subject are identity problems of lesbian women with the protagonist Eva-Maria, a young sculptor in Munich. Her process of finding her self and her relationship with a woman are confronted with artistic appreciation and friendship with men.

The novel *Passeggiere* was published in 1938 by Allert de Lange. Its protagonist falls in love with a sailor on the boat travel from San Francisco to Genoa and gives up her independence, at least temporarily. Perhaps the motive of the boat travel can be read as the restlessness of Winsloe's existence at that time and the protagonist's failure as a pianist to start a new life in the USA parallels with the author's situation.

In autumn of 1938 Winsloe got the chance to leave Germany for a longer period, yet again as an „expert for girl's themes“. She wrote the script for Georg Wilhelm Pabst's *Jeune filles en détresse* (1939) on a child whose parents are about to divorce. The film was only a moderate success - and a few days later the Second World War broke out. Winsloe decided to stay in France. In October 1939 she moved to the

south and settled in Cagnes near Nizza. There she met Simone Gentet, a Suisse ten years her junior. They stayed together during the following years.

In a letter to Dorothy Thompson from July 1941 she complained about her „flops of the last years“ as author. As a reason she saw especially her „voluntary emigration“. „It is no fun to write German when you want your work to be published.“ Simone Gentet translated some of her work into French but there were almost no possibilities to publish in occupied France. Still, writing was extremely important for Christa Winsloe. For her it was hope for life and work after the war. „Of course you think yourself as ridiculous, to hide your head in the sand of your imagination“ she grumbled in 1944 in a letter to Hertha von Gerhardt (1896-1978) an author and friend in Berlin, „ but after the war there also must be books and plays“.

With increasing scarceness of food and money their struggle for survival got more and more difficult. Nevertheless Winsloe looked after refugees who were more at risk than herself. Her motto was „you have to help, when you can.“ Urgently (and not in vain) she asked Dorothy Thompson for help in March 1941. She asked for food and money: „This would be an incredible joy for a lot of pale humans and a few children of prisoners in Germany who I am looking after.“

Because of an imminent evacuation order Christa Winsloe and Simone Gentet left the Cote d'Azur in February 1944 and travelled to Cluny in Burgundy. Winsloe planned to fight their way through to her sister-in-law in Hungary. Just before the landing of the allied troops in Normandy she got the necessary transit visa for Germany. Yet they never travelled. Both women were attacked by four Frenchmen on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1944 and shot in a forest near Cluny. Later on the gang leader, a livestock dealer called Lambert, referred to an alleged order of the *résistance*. The women were supposed to have been spies and to have collaborated with the occupying power. Though these accusations were absolutely untenable and though Lambert proved to be an „ordinary criminal“, he and his co-defendants were acquitted for lack of evidence in 1948.

Apart from *Mädchen in Uniform* all Christa Winsloe's works are almost unknown. Because of the Nazis' takeover and her „voluntary emigration“ much remained unpublished and due to her tragic death many texts remain forgotten. Also the male dominated genre of play writing is very hard for female authors to get performed. Many of Winsloe's texts contain critical discussions with the traditional women's role or with gender relations. Often she put finding one's self of women and girls in the

centre. The protagonists fight for their identity and seek to assert themselves in a hostile men's world. For instance in the anti-war story *Pischta*, situated during the First World War in Hungary, a woman travels disguised as a man to escape pestering by soldiers. Or in the play *Aino* (1941) addressing the refugees' theme a Finnish girl dresses as a boy.

As mentioned above the author addressed female homosexuality in several works as a literary subject not least before the background of her own (though not exclusive) relations to women. In her unpublished play *Sylvia und Sybille*, situated in 1931, lesbianism is the explicit theme. Sylvia, a 16 year old daughter of a widowed colonel falls in love with Sybille, the young and beautiful mother of a friend. Sybille answers Sylvia's love but ends the relation in the last second fearing social ostracism and the loss of her son. Perhaps the author thought it too daring to crown a play with an unusual insight into the homosexual subculture with a happy end?

The likewise unpublished novel *Die halbe Geige (Half the Violin)* from 1935 and written in Hollywood asks for sympathy for homosexual men. A man who marries because of social pressure makes not only himself unhappy but also the unsuspecting woman. Thus Winsloe pleads they should and should be allowed not to live against their „true nature“. „I am so happy to have come back to my subject“ she wrote to Dorothy Thompson while working on the novel. „And I feel that I am only good, when I am on it. This work is on the same line as Manuela and my book 'Life begins'.“

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